

Dance with me

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Dance with me

by [StarsMadeinHeaven](#)

Summary

AU. Lovino Vargas started taking tango lessons completely by accident. Who would have thought that one day he wouldn't mind those hands roaming over his body? That he would be dancing with his teacher as if there was no one in the room but the two of them?

Chapter 1

Chapter One

The job announcement said that knowledge of the Italian language was a must. Lovino Vargas could speak Spanish too, so he was hired immediately. By the end of his first week there, Lovino was one-hundred percent certain that this wasn't the job of the century and that he was never going to be employee of the month. A white-collar job could be anything but exciting, after all, but this. This was getting ridiculous.

"How about you bring the awesome me a cup of coffee, Mr. Vargas?"

If Lovino's hands hadn't been full he would have punched the other right in the jaw. The white haired man dangled his empty cup right in front of Lovino's nose and had the nerve to actually smirk at him.

Lovino didn't sign up for this.

"So?"

"In a few, Mr. Beilschmidt," Lovino said. Breath in, breath out, you have three hours to go. Three hours, twenty-nine minutes and fifty seconds to be exact. Forty-nine. Forty-eight.

"Vice-president Beilschmidt," the man said, pride puffing out his chest. Lovino wanted to strangle him, chop him and feed him to the pigs. Poor pigs, though.

At least the phone he was balancing between his shoulder and ear wasn't ringing. Yet. His biceps were shaking from the effort. Who would have thought that paper could weight so much? The stack of papers Lovino was cradling in his arms was as heavy as a baby elephant.

"Yes, vice-president Beilschmidt," Lovino repeated, emphasizing his title with a meaningful arch of his left brow. Beilschmidt's smirk slowly disappeared from his pale face. Lovino wanted to smirk, but opted to keep his face as bold as brass. It was the vice-president's turn to make a move. Lovino waited. Beilschmidt held the empty cup above Lovino's nose and slowly lowered it atop the stack of papers Lovino was holding. Lovino followed it with his eyes. Strabismus surely didn't suit him. Vice-president Gilbert Beilschmidt, asshole extraordinaire, gently placed his cup right on top of the stack, now a baby elephant with a hat.

"Come back in ten minutes," Beilschmidt said and winked. Lovino was glad that his empty cup was partially covering Beilschmidt's face otherwise he would have spit right in the other's eye.

Lovino carefully turned around and walked out of vice-president Beilschmidt's personal office. Outside: the pandemonium. Phones were ringing while people were shouting at each other and into their phones. And then paperwork, paperwork all around! A parade of papers and files dancing to the sound of clicking pens and coffee slurping.

Since Lovino started working there he hasn't spoken Italian once, let alone Spanish. His main duties were making sure the espresso machine was still working and making photocopies. He was a good mailman too. Give him a couple of years there, and he would go straight in the asylum, and not even in a fancy one. He wouldn't afford it.

"Mr. Vargas!" a tall, bespectacled man called him. Lovino cursed under his breath. He tried to walk faster, but Beilschmidt's cup was on the verge of falling and who knew what would happen if it chipped.

"Yes, Mr. Von Bock?" Lovino asked, all smiles. Okay, fine. Lovino didn't smile. He tried to be nice, though. Close your eyes and count to ten, his father used to say. He was going to count to one-hundred for good measure.

"The president wants to see you".

Lovino leaped back in surprise. The empty cup threatened to jump but was too scared of heights to actually do it. The phone, however, did not have the same problem and it crashed on the floor under Lovino's feet. The screen slightly cracked, much to Lovino's displeasure.

"Why?" Lovino asked, lifting his eyes to Von Bock's round face. "What did I do, now?"

Von Bock shrugged, picked up Lovino's phone and dropped it into the vice-president's cup before he turned on his heels and left him alone with his panic attack.

If CEO Ludwig Beilschmidt wanted to see you, it wasn't a good sign. Surely, he didn't want to drink a toast to Lovino's impeccable work. Lovino was supposed to answer calls like the rest of the employees, but ended up being everyone's favorite handyman instead. Did Beilschmidt finally decide to reduce Lovino's salary? He was doing his best. Actually, he should be promoted for putting up with the vice-president's shit. Beilschmidt was going to fire him, wasn't he? Darn it. He needed the job, even if it was as exciting as counting sheep. Since his father died, Lovino was in charge of the rent and his brother's tuition. He dropped college to work full time, grateful that he could at least include his language skills to his otherwise poor curriculum. What if he got fired? What was he going to do? It will take him months to find another job. Oh, for the love of the sacred muffin. Lovino wouldn't stand another round of interviews and rejection letters...

"What is that?" a woman's voice shook him out of his thoughts. Lovino looked up at the brown haired woman standing right in front of him. She eyed Lovino's phone warily and arched an eyebrow in question.

"It's the vice-president's coffee," Lovino explained.

"Quite stodgy, isn't it?"

"Well, you get what you deserve, Elizabeta," Lovino said. Elizabeta snorted.

"What did Von Bock want from you?"

“The CEO wants to see me,” Lovino answered. “He’s going to fire me, isn’t he?” he asked, his voice brimming with panic. Elizabeta shook her head and gently took the baby elephant from Lovino’s loving arms.

“Oh, come on. You are such a drama queen, sometimes,” Elizabeta said. “Let me take it from here and go see what he wants”.

“I’m not a drama queen,” Lovino muttered, but Elizabeta shooed him away and Lovino could do nothing but face his destiny. He played with the idea of hiding in the first broom closet on his way and hope that the CEO would completely forget about him, but decided against it. Going back to Elizabeta with no news was much more dangerous than spending two minutes with a Kenyan black mamba in a small cardboard box.

His eyes casted down, Lovino walked straight to the CEO’s office and knocked on the door. He waited a few seconds and pushed it open. Ludwig Beilschmidt was just a couple of years younger than Lovino but had the confidence of an old magnate with twenty years of experience in hand. The blond man looked up from the documents he was signing and beckoned him to sit.

“Mr. Vargas, I wanted to talk to you,” Ludwig said.

“What about?” Lovino asked. Ludwig sighed and intertwined his hands above the desk.

“I received some complaints from one of your supervisors,” Ludwig began, straight to the point. “It looks like you fail to finish tasks assigned to you-!”

“I try my best,” Lovino interrupted him. Ludwig massaged his temples, and Lovino bit his lip. Damn his hotheadedness.

“I am aware of that,” Ludwig said, “and I actually believe you are overworking yourself”.

Oh, great. He was fired. He probably should start job hunting as soon as-! Wait. What did he say? Lovino narrowed his eyes at Ludwig in suspicion, but the man still looked mentally fit.

“I don’t understand,” Lovino said, choosing his words carefully. He almost had a heart attack when his CEO blushed.

“I can see there is a lot on your mind nowadays,” Ludwig said, “so I propose you relax and take your time with things. You are not our little handyman and you don’t have to bring Gilbert coffee. Actually, call me if he as much dares to ask you for some”.

Oh.

When he reported to Elizabeta, she was as shocked as Lovino was.

“He said what?”

“He said I should call him if that asshole of a vice-president wants more coffee. Do you think he has an addiction or something?” Lovino asked.

“Not that,” Elizabeta clicked her tongue. “Did he really say you should relax?”

Lovino shrugged and continued making photocopies. Elizabeta played with the necklace around her neck and paced up and down the confined space where the photocopiers were.

“He’s kinda right,” Elizabeta announced suddenly and smiled when Lovino arched an eyebrow in question. “You do need to relax, Lovino. You are not the guy I met in high school. All you think about is money, how are you going to pay the rent and Feliciano’s studies and healthcare. You are getting boring”.

“Thank you,” Lovino said bitter.

“You used to joke a lot!” Elizabeta exclaimed. Lovino didn’t dignify her with a look and arranged the photocopies in two piles. “Oh, I know! You could come to tango class with me”.

Lovino almost dropped the first pile on the floor and snapped his head to Elizabeta in disbelief. A glimmer of hope flickered in Elizabeta’s big, green eyes, and Lovino immediately shook his head no.

“Why not?” Elizabeta asked, upset that Lovino was so quick to turn her down. “Roderich and I decided to join this class to spice up our love life. Marriage is great, sure, but sometimes you need to find something different to add to your boring daily routine. Today is going to be our very first day of tango, and I am so excited! Maybe it’s going to help you loosen up a bit too”.

“No way in hell,” Lovino said.

“Why don’t you try it out? Just for today. You won’t even need to dance,” Elizabeta said. “I can call our tango teacher and tell him I’m going to bring someone who-!”

“I said no,” Lovino said, picking his photocopies up and making a bee line towards the cubicles. Elizabeta followed him.

“But-!” she started, but before she could end her sentence, Lovino’s phone started ringing in his pocket. He shoved his photocopies into Elizabeta’s arms and picked it up. It was his brother.

“Lovino!” Feliciano cried. “Are you on your way home yet?”

Lovino shot a look over his shoulder towards the big digital clock hanging on the wall furthest from his cubicle. His shift was going to end in ten minutes.

“Not yet, why?” Lovino asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Feliciano said. “Just buy some pasta on your way back. We are having a guest for dinner and I can’t go grocery shopping. I still have one more class”.

“A guest?” Lovino repeated, taken aback. “Who?”

“A guest?” Elizabeta asked, pressing her ear on the phone too. Lovino tried to shrug her off but to no avail. She shushed him and waited for Feliciano to speak.

“Yeah...” his brother trailed off. Now Lovino was worried.

“Who?”

Feliciano mumbled something under his breath. Elizabeta squeaked in surprise.

“*Your boyfriend?*” Lovino shouted so loudly everyone stopped what they were doing to stare at him. Lovino’s face became ten shades of red and he quickened his step to hide inside his cubicle. Elizabeta followed him, put down the piles of paper on Lovino’s desk and pressed her ear on the phone again.

“This is even better than tango class,” Elizabeta murmured, excited.

“Since when do you have a boyfriend?” Lovino asked pushing Elizabeta away. Feliciano laughed nervously.

“Just buy some pasta,” his brother retorted and hang up. Lovino stared at his phone as if it had somehow insulted his intelligence.

“I guess you are not coming to tango class,” Elizabeta snickered and patted Lovino on the back. “Don’t hold it against him, Lovi. He’s a grown-up, after all. At least, he’s having fun,” she added, teasingly, and waltzed away. Lovino fought against the urge to hurl his already damaged phone at her.

Lovino’s day couldn’t get any worse.

But fact was, fate was not done with him yet. Feliciano kept his mouth shut throughout dinner preparations, and a sense of impending doom overwhelmed Lovino while they waited for their guest. When he finally rang their doorbell, Lovino was sure this was how Perseus felt like when he fought against Medusa. His heart was racing in his chest. Cold shivers ran down his spine. Feliciano opened the door, and Lovino almost dropped on the floor, petrified.

“Good evening”.

There was no way in hell that this was indeed happening. Ludwig Beilschmidt stood by the door and didn’t flinch when Feliciano wrapped his arm around his shoulder and escorted him in.

“Lovino, this is Ludwig,” Feliciano said, as if he didn’t know Ludwig was Lovino’s fucking boss. Ludwig stared at him, a bottle of wine in his hands, and Lovino stared right back, a napkin in his hands because he had been setting the table.

“Mr. Vargas,” Ludwig greeted him.

Oh, for the love of what was holy!

“You can call him Lovino,” Feliciano said. Lovino shifted his gaze on his brother and opened his mouth to say something, but all he could utter was a pathetic squeaking sound.

“I told you not to bring anything!” Feliciano exclaimed turning to face Ludwig again. He took the bottle of wine from his boyfriend’s hands and took a step towards Lovino.

“Please don’t do anything stupid,” Feliciano pleaded in his ear, and Lovino pointed the napkin at Ludwig as if that could somehow explain his awkward silence.

Lovino was going to do something stupid, no doubt about it.

“Oh, err, yes. Sorry, I won’t join you for dinner,” Lovino stuttered, ignoring the way Feliciano’s eyebrows furrowed in worry. “I just remembered. Oh, this is so fucking embarrassing. Elizabeta wants me to take her to tango class. Tango class! Can you believe her? This is so fucking embarrassing,” he mumbled, casting his eyes down and making a bee line to the door. “I’ll quickly take her there and come back. Start eating without me. I’ll be back!” he exclaimed and slammed the door behind him.

Feliciano and Ludwig stared at the closed door in wonder, when, suddenly, Lovino opened it again, stormed into the room, disappeared into the kitchen and came back with his phone.

“Phone,” he said stupidly and left them alone once more.

Unexpectedly, Elizabeta was not happy that Lovino was going to join them. She wanted to know who Feliciano’s boyfriend was and how he looked like, but Lovino wasn’t going to give away something so huge without a fight. By the time Lovino arrived to the dance studio Elizabeta had told him about on the phone, the tango lesson had already started.

The hardwood floor creaked treacherously the moment he stepped inside the ballroom, and Lovino suppressed a yelp of surprise when five pairs of eyes turned to look at him. To say Lovino wanted to flee would be an understatement.

“Are you here for the tango class?” a charming voice asked him and Lovino’s eyes shifted to the man standing right in the middle of the room. Lovino’s gaze flickered to the other’s sculpted legs then up to the chest and finally to his face, lingering just a moment longer than necessary on the man’s perfectly white teeth and bright green eyes.

“Uh,” Lovino said. Elizabeta snickered behind her hand, and Lovino shot her a murderous look. Roderich stood right next to her, his chin lifted up in defiance, although it was obvious he really didn’t want to be there.

“Well, come on in,” the tango teacher said. “I’m Antonio Fernández Carriedo,” he introduced himself, “and you are?”

“Lo-!” he coughed, “Lovino,” he said, calmer.

“What a nice name,” Antonio complimented him and turned to face the class again. “Okay, let me go over your names once more, since it’s our first time together!” he exclaimed, cheerfully. Lovino walked over to where Elizabeta was standing. She nudged him with her

elbow; he almost bit her neck in retaliation. He didn't, because black mambas always have the upper hand, if they had hands.

"So, you are Katyusha, right?" Antonio asked pointing at a busty girl, standing shyly by the door. "Elizabeta and Roderich," he continued, "Bella, wasn't it? And you are...?"

"Matthew," a blond man said, and Lovino jumped back in surprise, almost stepping on Roderich in the process. He hadn't noticed the man at all. Roderich coughed, placing his glasses farther up his nose.

"It's so nice to meet you all," Antonio said and walked over to the radio to put some music on. "Let's start with something easy today, shall we?" he asked, all smiles.

Lovino wondered what the hell he was doing there. Oh, yeah. Having dinner with his fucking boss was no better choice.

Antonio paired him up with Bella, a cute blond girl, and Lovino decided that dancing with her was not going to be that bad, after all. Better than seeing Ludwig shoving his tongue down Feliciano's throat. God, he didn't need the mental picture.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I'm so glad to see that people are still interested in this story! Thank you very much. :)))
For those who remember it when I posted it for the first time many years ago, just keep in mind that it's going to be slightly different. Comments and constructive criticism is always appreciated.

Chapter Two

“How long?” Lovino demanded pacing up and down the kitchen floor. Feliciano remained hidden behind the counter, a nervous smile dancing on his lips. A trickle of sweat ran down Feliciano’s temple, and he wiped it off with the back of his hand. Lovino waited; Feliciano wrung his hands.

“Five months?”

“Is that a question?” Lovino asked, halting abruptly. He shot a threatening look at his brother, but it didn’t have the desired effect. In fact, the worried expression on Feliciano’s face slowly disappeared, replaced by a deep scowl. It was in times like this that Lovino realized that the two of them looked more alike than they cared to admit.

“Five months,” Feliciano repeated, just a little bit more determined. Lovino groaned.

“You mean you have been dating my boss since I started working for him? What the fuck, Feliciano?”

“It just happened”.

“And you were going to tell me...?” Lovino pushed.

“Yesterday?” Feliciano said, a bubble of nervous laughter escaping him. Lovino narrowed his eyes at him, and Feliciano scratched the back of his neck, unsure of his next move. Lovino was quick to help him out with it.

“How?”

“It was an accident,” Feliciano said. “I didn’t even know he was your boss back then. Remember your first day at work? When I waited for you and you were late because you had a briefing with your supervisor? I bumped into Ludwig on my way inside the building, because I wanted to see what your working place looked like, and he was holding coffee, like this,” Feliciano wrapped his fingers around thin air, “and then-!” he mimicked someone

spilling hot coffee on himself. Lovino scrutinized his every movement. To him, Feliciano's Charlie Chapin impersonation was anything but amusing.

"Let me guess," Lovino said, "you wanted to apologize by asking him out?"

"Kinda?"

"Will you stop answering all of my questions with a question?" Lovino asked, clicking his tongue in annoyance. Feliciano rolled his eyes at his brother's reaction and nervously tapped his fingers on the wooden counter in front of him.

"Fine, you are right. I shouldn't have kept it a secret from you, but shouldn't I be angry too?" Feliciano whined. "You bailed on me. I understand he's your boss and everything, but to come up with such a lie just to avoid dining with us? That was a mean thing to do!"

"What lie?" Lovino asked, totally caught off guard. Feliciano threw his hands up in the air, and Lovino furrowed his eyebrows, puzzled.

"Tango class?" Feliciano said. "Really, Lovino? Do you think I'm *that* stupid?"

Lovino blushed and looked away, mumbling something unintelligible under his breath. Feliciano just stared at him, uncomprehending.

"What?"

"What?" Lovino asked, suddenly on the defensive. Feliciano blinked at his brother as if he had grown another pair of eyes right in the middle of his forehead.

"Lovino?"

"It wasn't a lie," Lovino stuttered. Feliciano's eyes bugged out, and Lovino shoved his hands in his pockets. "It's just, err... you know Elizabeta, right?" Lovino asked, and Feliciano nodded once. "She forced me to do it," Lovino continued. "And when I saw Beilschmidt-!"

"Ludwig," Feliciano interrupted him.

"Fine, whatever," Lovino said, running a hand through his hair. "When I saw him, I-! Well, I just-!"

"Okay, I get it".

Feliciano's face fell and he glanced around him as if he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do next. Lovino licked his lips, feeling his mouth go dry.

"I didn't lie," Lovino confessed, speaking louder. "Yesterday was my first tango class".

Feliciano turned his head to face him again and raised both of his eyebrows when Lovino shrugged. Lovino could practically see the 'Are you kidding me?' hanging on the other's bottom lip and he shook his head no in answer to Feliciano's silent question.

“I met a cute girl there. Her name’s Bella. And she is, pretty I mean,” Lovino blurted. “She’s actually funny too and didn’t mind when I kept stepping on her feet. Honestly, Feli, tango is a pain in the ass”.

Feliciano started shaking with laughter, and Lovino too felt his lips quiver upwards in amusement. Truth be told, if someone had told Lovino a year before that he would end up taking tango classes one day, he would have punched them right in the face. Lovino Vargas didn’t do tango. Too many steps and pirouettes while keeping a straight face. He could dance a tarantella after guzzling a bucket of wine, if he was in the mood to. But tango? Sober? On his own free will? Ridiculous.

“Who knows,” Feliciano teased him, “you might end up liking it”.

“I doubt it,” Lovino said. “But it’s not like I have much of a choice, is it? Elizabeta already signed me up and she wouldn’t like it if I just cut class”.

“No, she wouldn’t,” Feliciano agreed. “She can be vicious if things don’t go according to her plans”.

“She told me Bella and I make a cute couple,” Lovino said. “If her plan is to set me up with her, I actually don’t mind”.

Feliciano laughed, and Lovino let out a sigh of relief. Feliciano had forgotten about Ludwig and the dinner disaster.

While it was true that Elizabeta would be terribly disappointed if he gave up now, Lovino knew she would eventually come around to it. His first tango lesson, however, was not that bad and it offered him a good way to switch up his boring daily routine. Considering that he had to deal with a Beilschmidt both at the office *and* at home, he decided to give tango a go.

Bella was just the icing on the cake.

Since Elizabeta and Roderich danced together, there were only two girls in class Lovino could partner with. Bella and Lovino might both be a little bit clumsy, but nothing compared to Katyusha. She was incredibly sexy, but under no circumstances would Lovino change partners with Matthew.

Katyusha was a complete disaster.

“Ouch!”

There it goes again, Lovino thought. Everybody stopped staring at their feet and shifted their attention to Matthew and Katyusha standing at the other side of the room.

“My bad!” Katyusha apologized while Matthew comically jumped on one leg in front of her. She made to kneel down to assess the damage caused, but the guy became ten shades of red and quickly pulled her back up.

“It’s fine, don’t worry,” he reassured her. “Your heels are just a little bit sharp. No big deal”.

“No big deal my ass,” Lovino muttered, and Bella snickered behind her hand.

“It’s fine, Katyusha,” Antonio piped in, and all eyes were suddenly on him. He smiled encouragingly at her and pressed the stop button on the DVD player. “This is a lesson you all need to learn,” Antonio continued glancing behind his shoulder towards all of them.

Lovino rolled his eyes when Bella snapped to attention. It was obvious she was infatuated with their tango instructor, but she could at least be low-key about it. Antonio was handsome, sure, but not more than anybody else.

As if he could read Lovino’s thoughts, Antonio turned around to face him head on and winked. Lovino immediately averted his gaze, slightly biting his lips when he realized that, despite his plain appearance, Antonio had very beautiful eyes.

“You see, tango is nothing but a game,” Antonio said pressing the play button again. Another, more suave melody filled the ballroom, and everybody moved to take their positions. “The man leads and the woman follows, right? But let me let you in on a secret: that’s all for show”.

Lovino carefully watched him as he strode across the ballroom and put a hand on Katyusha to straighten her back. He then proceeded to adjust Matthew’s hands on his partner and smiled widely when he was fully satisfied with the result.

“The man might be leading,” Antonio explained, “but she is the one who does all the tricks, the one who truly makes tango the sensual and compelling dance we all know and love. She is practically the star of this relationship”.

“That’s not really a secret,” Roderich commented, and Elizabeta snorted in amusement. Antonio laughed and stepped back to the middle of the dancefloor.

“Moreover, the man makes the first move,” Antonio continued, “but he can’t force the woman to dance if she doesn’t want to”.

Katyusha blushed under Antonio’s stare.

“And the woman won’t never accept to dance, if he keeps backing away,” Antonio said shifting his eyes on Matthew. “Let’s keep that in mind, okay?” he asked. Everybody nodded.

“Let’s go over the basic steps,” Antonio ordered. Bella turned to Lovino again and put her hands on his shoulders. As if they had agreed on it beforehand, they lowered their gazes on their shoes at the same time.

“You move or I move?” Bella asked under her breath.

“I’m pretty sure I should be moving first,” Lovino said.

“Right leg backwards?” Bella asked.

“Your right or my right?” Lovino asked.

“You take a step forwards with your left leg,” Antonio suddenly interrupted them, making them both jump back in surprise. “She takes one backwards. No, no, not like this. May I burrow your partner for a second, Bella?” Antonio asked.

Lovino’s eyes widened up in fear when Bella moved away and let Antonio take her place. His tango instructor flashed him a bright smile, and Lovino couldn’t help but stare with his mouth hanging open as Antonio led Lovino’s hands on his own waist.

“Don’t be scared, I won’t bite you,” Antonio said, laughing, and Lovino snapped his mouth shut.

“Don’t make me regret this,” Lovino hissed. Antonio’s eyes flickered with amusement and abruptly pulled Lovino up against his chest. Bella snickered behind them, and Lovino shot her a murderous look.

“First step, Lovino,” Antonio said, drawing Lovino’s attention back on him. “Don’t look down. Eyes on me”.

“Easy for you to say,” Lovino muttered, but did as told. He gulped down his embarrassment and took a small step forwards.

“Wrong leg,” Antonio reproached him. “Take a bigger step, but not too much. We don’t need to jump and land in a split, do we?”

Lovino bit down his irritation, but once again did as Antonio instructed. He furrowed his eyebrows when Antonio’s leg smoothly followed Lovino’s one. When he took another tentative step forwards, Antonio effortlessly moved backwards with him.

“Now I get it,” Matthew said.

“See?” Antonio said turning his head to the rest of the class while he was still pressed against Lovino. “I follow Lovino’s steps. If his step is too wide, we both lose our balance and tumble over. If he takes a small step and I don’t, it’s just going to look awkward. Lovino must be sure of what he is doing, and I must act accordingly”.

“I understand,” Katyusha said.

“What happens when he wants me to flip and dip?” Elizabeta suddenly asked, making Antonio giggle. Lovino felt the other’s chest move against his own and hesitantly tried to push the other away. They were standing too close for comfort. Antonio’s grip on him, however, was firm.

“You’re getting ahead of yourself,” Antonio said.

“Well, it’s one of the most jaw dropping moves I’ve seen tango dancers do so far,” Elizabeta explained.

“In comparison to other tango moves that’s actually pretty easy,” Antonio said. “Lovino, would you mind following me this time?”

“What?” Lovino cried, but Antonio moved before Lovino could work out what was happening. Antonio took a step forwards, and Lovino instinctively followed his lead.

“I’m going to dip you,” Antonio warned him, speaking softly into his ear. Lovino’s eyebrows rose impossibly high, but his body moved on its own accord, as if mesmerized by Antonio’s movements. Antonio tucked him underneath his arm, holding him close, and Lovino had no idea when both his hands hooked around Antonio’s shoulders. His heart skipped a beat. Antonio wrapped a hand around his waist while he cradled the back of Lovino’s neck with the other and gently lowered him down.

“It’s a good thing you’re a natural,” Antonio complimented him, his face a breath away from Lovino’s.

“Fuck-!” Lovino cursed and shoved Antonio away, momentarily forgetting he was just a feet away from the floor. He cursed loudly again when his butt hit the hard wood.

“And this is why you need to hold onto him at all times,” Elizabeta teased him, and Lovino flipped her off. Antonio helped him back on his feet and patted his shoulder encouragingly.

“You okay?” Antonio asked, almost a whisper.

“I- err... yeah, no big deal,” Lovino said, shrugging him off. Antonio winked at him, and Lovino massaged his temples in frustration. Antonio chuckled.

“Let leave this for later, shall we?” Antonio said and walked back to the middle of the ballroom. “You need to get the hang of the basics first!”

Bella immediately put her hands on Lovino’s shoulders again.

“We’ve got this, right?” she asked, smiling brightly.

“We do,” Lovino said.

This time they effortlessly moved around without stepping on each other’s shoes.

The lesson proceeded smoothly and by the end of it Lovino was so exhausted from all the toing and froing he wished he could teleport back home and sleep through the week. Unlike him, Elizabeta seemed reinvigorated by all the dancing. Her vigor amazed him. She was the only one who felt like talking while they all walked out the ballroom and made a bee line to the locker rooms. When Lovino caught her waiting for all of them by the main entrance, however, it suddenly hit him. Elizabeta was acting too happy to be considered entirely normal.

Lovino shook his head in disbelief when she proposed they went to a bar for a drink or two.

“We are practically family now. It’s time we get to know each other better,” she said.

Lovino shut a glance upwards. Right above them, on the second floor, was the ballroom they had been practicing in, but the music coming from it was much faster than the one they had been dancing to. Antonio was now dealing with a more advanced class, and Lovino

wondered what Antonio looked like dancing with the professionals. Oddly enough, Lovino would have preferred to stay behind rather than waste his evening in a filthy bar.

“I’ll pass, Lizzie,” Roderich said, pushing Lovino out of his thoughts. “I have to plan my lesson for tomorrow”.

“You’re a teacher?” Bella asked, amazed, and Roderich nodded.

“A music teacher,” he explained.

“And a very strict one at that,” Elizabeta added, but before Roderich could beg to differ, she leaned in and pecked him on the lips. “See you at home, then?”

Roderich courtly nodded and waved everyone goodbye before heading out. Lovino didn’t miss the sad look that flashed across Elizabeta’s face and arched an eyebrow in question. She ignored him.

“I actually wouldn’t mind a beer,” Matthew said.

“Why not,” Bella agreed. “I don’t have anything planned for tonight either”.

“Lovino?” Elizabeta asked, and Lovino almost jumped back in surprise. Lovino stared at her, ready to pass, but when he noticed how her lips quivered in a sad smile, he immediately changed his mind.

“Okay, whatever,” he said. If Elizabeta didn’t want to go home just yet, there must be a good reason to, he reasoned. Better not vex her.

Lovino should have known Elizabeta wanted him around for another reason entirely. By the time Lovino finally realized what she had in mind, they were already getting a table at a bar not far away from the dancing studio.

“So, who’s Feliciano’s boyfriend?” Elizabeta whispered when the rest of the group fought over the only menu on the table. Lovino narrowed his eyes at her, but she wasn’t intimidated by his threatening glare.

“Well?” she pushed.

“You don’t know him,” Lovino said.

“If I didn’t, you wouldn’t have been so secretive about it. So who is it? Is it bad?”

“It’s very bad,” Lovino agreed.

“He’s a gangster or something?” Elizabeta asked, worried.

“I wish he were”.

“Okay, something’s up,” Elizabeta said, scooting closer. “Is he much older than Feliciano?”

“I don’t think so,” Lovino cut short. “Same age, maybe. I never cared to ask”.

“What are you two whispering about over there?” Bella asked, catching their attention. “The guy is waiting for our orders!”

Lovino looked up at the awkward looking young man looming over them, notepad in hand. He made to grab the menu, but Elizabeta beat him to it.

“A beer and a glass of red wine for the lad,” Elizabeta said. “And maybe something to eat too”.

“Got it!” the guy said scribbling something down.

“Is he a college student?” Elizabeta asked, turning to look at Lovino again. He groaned.

“Are you giving me the third degree? Why don’t you ask Feliciano? He’s your friend too!”

Elizabeta arched an eyebrow.

“Oh, my God!” Lovino exclaimed throwing his arms in the air. “It’s the CEO, okay? Our CEO!”

“Our CEO?” Bella asked, shocked by Lovino’s outburst. The waiter mumbled something under his breath, shoved his notepad in his back pocket and walked away. Lovino wished he could do the same.

“You mean Ludwig Beilschmidt?” Elizabeta shouted, slamming her hands on the table.

“Who’s Ludwig Beilschmidt?” Katyusha asked, staring at Lovino with apprehension.

“The reason why I am taking tango class, apparently,” Lovino said slamming his face on the table. Elizabeta threw her head back and burst out laughing. Katyusha and Matthew shared an uncomprehending look, and Elizabeta wiped a fake tear before she explained:

“He’s our boss”.

“Oh,” Bella said.

“And my brother’s boyfriend,” Lovino blurted, his voice muffled against his arms.

“Oooh,” Bella said, wincing.

“That little fucker of my brother waited until yesterday to tell me. He invited my boss to dinner –no questions asked,” Lovino said. “I joined the class just to get away from them”.

“That’s... huh...” Matthew bit his lip.

“Matthew, you can say it,” Elizabeta said. “It was kind of a douche-y thing to do”.

Lovino flipped her off, but Elizabeta laughed.

“Since when?” Elizabeta asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Lovino mumbled.

“That reminds me... Why did you start taking tango class?” Matthew suddenly interrupted, grabbing Elizabeta’s attention. Lovino slowly moved his head up and blinked in surprise when Matthew smiled kindly at him.

“My brother signed me up as a joke,” Matthew continued as if to further help him out. “But when I went there to tell them I was not going to join the group, I met Antonio instead. He made such a good impression on me that I decided to give it a go”.

“He’s charming,” Bella said.

Just in that moment the waiter came back with their drinks, and Lovino glanced at his glass of red wine and the bowl of peanuts in front of his nose. He had suddenly lost his appetite.

“I like Antonio,” Elizabeta said grabbing a handful of peanuts. “He’s a good teacher”.

“He’s a shithead,” Lovino blurted, immediately regretting opening his mouth when Elizabeta’s fixed her eyes on him. “I mean, he looks like the kind of guy who has his head in the clouds”.

Matthew snorted.

“Yes, that’s what I thought too,” he agreed. “But he seems to know what he’s doing”.

“Yes,” Elizabeta said, grinning. Lovino eyed her warily. “He knows what he wants, right?”

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Lovino snapped.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice. He was flirting with you,” Elizabeta said, straight to the point.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that,” Lovino said, reaching for his glass of wine. He took a tentative sip but put the glass back down again. It tasted like piss.

“Stop teasing him, Lizzie,” Bella said, chuckling, and turned to look at Katyusha instead. “Why did you start tango class?”

Katyusha bounced in her seat, surprised to suddenly be the focus of everybody’s attention. She fiddled with her fingers and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“My therapist said I should do something that could help me overcome my shyness,” Katyusha said, blushing. “And when I saw the announcement for this tango class, I thought it was a great idea and leaped at the opportunity. But I’m such a disaster! Maybe I should just give up”.

“Oh, come on, we’re all newbies here,” Bella said, squeezing her shoulder encouragingly. “We’ll do great, I promise”.

“That’s right,” Elizabeta said. “What about you, Bella? Why did you take this class?”

“Oh, I was just sick and tired of everything,” she said. “My boyfriend broke up with me. I could have wallowed in self-pity but I decided to do something for myself instead”.

“You go, girl!” Elizabeta exclaimed, raising her glass to her. Bella laughed and clinked her drink against Elizabeta’s one. Lovino noticed how Elizabeta continuously managed to shift everybody’s attention away from her. Something was definitely up, he thought, but no matter how long he stared at her, he really couldn’t find anything amiss.

It was only when the group called it a night and split ways that Lovino built up the courage to directly ask her. They were walking to the bus stop all by themselves, when Lovino decided to make his move.

“Spit it out,” he said, taking her totally off-guard. “Why the sad look?”

Elizabeta blinked at him in surprise. She forced her mouth into a smile, but Lovino saw right through her façade.

“I’m going to call you a hypocrite from now on if you don’t tell me what’s wrong. You’ve been playing cops with me all evening long, Lizzie, so now it’s my turn”.

“Playing cops?” Elizabeta asked, amused.

“You know what I mean”.

Elizabeta let out a sigh and started playing with the necklace around her neck, deep in thought.

“I guess you’re right,” she breathed. She kept her eyes on the road ahead and added: “My marriage isn’t working, Lovino”.

“So it’s true you joined this class for-!”

“It’s worse than that,” Elizabeta interrupted him, her voice coming out harsher than she intended. “Sorry,” she apologized.

“It’s okay,” Lovino mumbled.

“We are drifting apart,” Elizabeta stuttered. “It’s complicated”.

“It’s fine, you don’t need to talk about it,” Lovino said.

“I’m quite jealous of Feliciano,” Elizabeta confessed. “He’s still in the foolish phase, you know? The one where you don’t have any responsibilities, where you are not really working on your differences and all you think of is being with each other. Love is all you need and that shit”.

Lovino’s breath hitched. Elizabeta’s cynicism surprised him. Things were really bad, he thought.

“You don’t even know that,” Lovino said. “I didn’t tell you how long they have been dating”.

“You didn’t need to,” Elizabeta said. “When he called you yesterday, I could feel it through the phone, his voice betrayed him”.

“Bullshit”.

“I guess you’ve never fallen love then,” Elizabeta said, smiling bitterly at him.

Lovino didn’t know what to say to that, so he gulped down and mumbled:

“It’s going to be alright”.

“Maybe,” Elizabeta said. “Maybe not”.

Lovino kept his mouth shut and they waited for the bus in complete silence.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter Three

“Lovino Vargas!” the deep, croaky voice was not what Lovino wanted to hear first thing in the morning. He sighed loudly, continued filling his paperwork and did anything he could to ignore the albino man looming over his cubicle. “Vargas!” the man shouted again.

Lovino was already pretty busy and dealing with a caffeine deprived vice-president was not in the list of things to do. He signed another paper, checked his clipboard and almost jumped back in surprise when the shiny black telephone on his desk started ringing.

“What is the meaning of this!” Gilbert Beilschmidt exclaimed. Lovino *finally* turned to look at him and stared at the pulsating vein at the corner of his boss’ temple, fascinated. Gilbert waved his empty cup in front of his nose to get Lovino’s attention back on his face.

“CEO orders,” Lovino answered, and Gilbert’s eyes became as wide as saucers. “He said I’m not allowed to bring you coffee anymore,” Lovino added. He was enjoying this immensely.

“He said what!” Gilbert exclaimed. Lovino wanted to laugh at the shocked expression on the other’s pale face, but decided against it. The telephone kept ringing, and Lovino raised an index finger at Gilbert, who looked ready to strangle him to death. As Lovino picked up the receiver, he lowered his index finger and raised the middle one instead.

Gilbert was fuming.

Lovino focused his whole attention on his phone call. He felt Gilbert’s eyes burn holes in the back of his head, but ignored the unpleasant feeling.

“I’m going to kill him,” Gilbert muttered under his breath, and Lovino arched an eyebrow at him. “My brother,” Gilbert explained, as if Lovino gave a damn. “He can’t do that to me!”

“I’m working,” Lovino said, placing a hand over the speaker. Gilbert rolled his red eyes, grabbed an office chair from the other cubicle and sat down next to Lovino. He patiently waited for Lovino to end his phone call. To say Lovino was irritated by it would be a huge understatement.

“I don’t know about you,” Lovino snapped immediately after he hung up. “But I’m trying to make a living here?”

“You say that as if I’m wasting your time,” Gilbert said.

“What the fuck do you want?” Lovino growled. So much for maintaining a professional relationship with the vice-president. They were never going to work it out.

“I know how you feel, pal,” Gilbert said, running a finger along the rim of his cup. “I heard the news. Ludwig kept me in the dark too. He didn’t tell me he was dating your brother until a week ago. I didn’t even know Feliciano was your brother!”

“You fucking met him?” Lovino asked, taken aback.

“Once,” Gilbert said. “By accident.”

“I don’t want to know the details,” Lovino muttered, and Gilbert laughed.

“They were just eating out together. Relax!” Gilbert exclaimed, an amused smirk gracing his features. “Anyway, you two are so different. Are you adopted or what?”

“For the love of God,” Lovino breathed. “We practically look the same!”

“He’s cuter.”

Lovino closed his eyes and massaged his temples, trying to pull himself together.

“You really stood them up, huh?” Gilbert continued, and Lovino slammed his head against the table. His phone started ringing again, and Gilbert picked it up.

“Give me that!” Lovino hissed, but Gilbert turned his back to him and started talking on the phone.

“What’s going on here?”

Lovino and Gilbert’s heads snapped toward Elizabeta. She eyed them both as if they had sprouted a second head and slowly put some documents on Lovino’s desk.

“Are you and Beilschmidt best buddies now?” she asked.

“It’s not what it looks like,” Lovino snapped.

“Got it,” Gilbert said on the phone and hung up. He smiled widely at Elizabeta, and Lovino felt shivers run down his spine.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Gilbert said and gave her a predatory look. Elizabeta’s gaze narrowed.

“Who was on the phone?” Lovino hastily asked, before Elizabeta could punch her boss square in the jaw. Gilbert shrugged.

“Mr. von Bock,” he replied. “He wants you to... I don’t remember anymore,” he added sheepishly, his attention fixed on Elizabeta standing awkwardly behind Lovino.

“Goddammit,” Lovino cursed and shot up from his seat. He didn’t actually mind the distraction. Dealing with Mr. von Bock was a lot better than having Gilbert Beilschmidt all over him for no reason whatsoever.

“What are you doing here, sir?” Elizabeta asked, sarcasm seeping through her words. Lovino wondered the same thing. Gilbert’s grin widened and he ran a hand through his white hair, trying to look cool.

“Lovino is my brother-in-law,” Gilbert said, making Lovino gag.

“Brother-in-law,” Elizabeta repeated, blinking at them both in surprise.

“Fuck,” Lovino cursed. He picked up the documents Elizabeta had left on his desk when, suddenly, his smartphone buzzed. He reached into his back pocket and cursed loudly when he saw the message Feliciano had just texted him.

“What rotten luck!” he whispered angrily and put his phone away. Gilbert and Elizabeta arched an eyebrow in question, and Lovino clicked his tongue at their nosiness.

“I will bring you all the coffee you want, if you manage to break up our brothers!” Lovino exclaimed, and Gilbert snickered.

“Tempting,” he said. “But I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“What the hell,” Lovino muttered.

“He’s got a temper,” Gilbert said looking up at Elizabeta and crossed his arms behind his neck in a nonchalant manner. “How long have you been friends?” he asked.

“Is there something wrong, Lovino?” Elizabeta asked instead, ignoring Gilbert’s advancements.

“My brother is going out tonight,” he said bitter. “And the worst part is I forgot my keys home.”

“Oh, well, in that case you can-!” Elizabeta started, but Gilbert beat her to it.

“-crash at my place,” Gilbert suggested, making them both jump back in surprise. His gaze flickered between the two of them and he raised his hands in the air. “What?”

“What’s wrong with you today?” Lovino asked.

“We can braid each other’s hair and chitchat over nail polish,” Gilbert joked.

“Please, kill him for me,” Lovino said, turning to look at Elizabeta. Gilbert burst out laughing and stood up from his chair. He patted Lovino on the back and grinned widely at him.

“You’re such a funny guy!” Gilbert exclaimed and then turned to Elizabeta. “And you are gorgeous as always, Lizzie.”

“Please refrain from calling me that,” Elizabeta said, menacingly.

“Got it,” he said and winked. Lovino rolled his eyes to the ceiling and left his cubicle before he could witness a murder.

After meeting with Mr. von Bock, Lovino was overburdened with work and he completely forgot about his problem. It was only when it was time to go home that he realized he should have called Feliciano to ask him to bring him his keys. Unfortunately for him, it was already too late and Feliciano wasn't answering his calls. He could always ask his CEO to call him for him but the bastard wasn't in his office anymore. Accepting Gilbert's offer was out of the question, and spending his evening with Elizabeta trying to pretend he didn't know about her marriage problems was going to be nothing less but grueling.

So Lovino decided to patiently wait for Feliciano to get back to him. He could always kill time going for a walk to the city. Was he happy about it? Absolutely not. Truth be told, he hoped he would eventually bump into his brother on the street, grab Feliciano by the ear and drag him back home.

He wasn't that lucky.

Lovino walked aimlessly around, went window-shopping and got lost. Guided by his instincts, Lovino strolled in circles until he finally recognized a familiar building outlined against the sky. He had no idea how he arrived in front of the dance school but he was glad that he had finally found somewhere he could sit undisturbed for a while. His legs felt heavy. No one stopped him when he pushed the doors open, and Lovino climbed up the stairs to the now familiar ballroom with his heart beating madly in his chest. Tango music filled the air.

His breath caught.

Antonio was dancing with one of his students: a beautiful woman with long, raven hair and eyes as black as opals. He had his hands on her waist, touching her as if she were a delicate flower. The woman, however, was anything but fragile. She took quick, decisive steps, following the rhythm, and sensually moved her body against Antonio. He acted accordingly, succumbing to her every wish.

Her heels echoed off the walls. She spun around and fell back in Antonio's open arms. His hand moved along her leg, lingered over her knee for a second before he abruptly pulled her up. Their faces were now a breath away from each other, and Lovino wondered if they were going to kiss. They sure looked like they wanted to. In fact, Lovino expected them to rip each other's clothes off at any moment. But no. Antonio dipped her, she leaned flawlessly back and the music stopped.

The woman's childish laughter broke the spell. Lovino's eyes shifted to Antonio, who finally let her go and took a big step backwards.

"Perfect," he said, smiling widely at her. "Don't be nervous. We practiced so many times I'm sure you are going to do just great."

"It's a pity my partner couldn't make it today," she said. "I would have liked to review the choreography with him too."

"Don't worry, you'll both do fine," Antonio reassured her and the woman beamed.

"Thank you!"

“See you at the tango show then. I’ll be there rooting for you!” he exclaimed. The woman nodded enthusiastically, and Lovino followed her with his eyes as she grabbed her things and walked past him to the changing room. It was in that moment that Antonio acknowledged his presence.

“Lovino!” he exclaimed. Lovino felt like a deer caught in the headlights. He was tempted to flee and hide in the changing room for the rest of the evening, but it was impossible. When Antonio smiled brightly at him and beckoned him inside, Lovino could do nothing but oblige him.

“We don’t have class today, do we?” Antonio asked, honestly confused, and Lovino blushed madly under the other’s enquiring stare.

“N-no,” Lovino stuttered. “I was just-! I was killing time. My brother went out with a... and I-! Well, I don’t have my keys with me, so I-! It’s none of your business.”

“I see,” Antonio said, walking towards the CD player. Lovino found himself watching his retreating back and almost slapped himself in the face for being such a moron.

“She was amazing,” Lovino said, at a loss for words. Antonio turned to look at him, his chest puffing out with pride and his eyes brimming with joy.

“She’s one of my first students,” Antonio said. “I’ve been teaching her tango for five years.”

“I thought she has been dancing much longer,” Lovino said.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Antonio said, pressing the eject button and putting the CD back in its place. “It means I’m a pretty awesome teacher.”

“Doesn’t that mean she is a pretty good dancer too?” Lovino asked, feeling his lips tug upwards. Antonio picked up a backpack lying on the floor and walked over to him.

“You’re right,” Antonio said, chuckling. “It takes two to tango,” Antonio joked. Lovino shook his head in disbelief. Antonio’s eyes wandered all over his face, and Lovino wondered why it felt so good to have his teacher’s attention solely on him.

Maybe it was the fact Antonio didn’t press the matter further and just went along with having Lovino there for no apparent reason. Lovino could have very well waited at the reception flirting with the cute secretary but he had preferred to make a fool of himself in front of Antonio instead.

As if Antonio could read his mind, a knowing look flashed across his face, and Lovino just arched an eyebrow at him, daring him to say something about it.

“She is going to participate in a tango show this weekend,” Antonio said instead. “We can go together, if you are interested.”

Lovino was taken aback. Was Antonio asking him out? It seemed like it.

Lovino tilted his head to the side.

Interesting.

“Y-yeah,” he muttered. “Why not?”

“Cool,” Antonio said. “You are going to love it. Maybe one day you’ll participate too, so it would also be educational.”

“I’m never going to dance in front of so many people,” Lovino laughed. “Don’t fuck with me.”

Wrong choice of words! Lovino blushed and crossed his arms over his chest. What the hell was wrong with him?

“Stop being so humble,” Antonio said and winked. “You’re good at it.”

“How can you tell already? I’m just a newbie.” Lovino said.

“Trust me,” Antonio said, and Lovino felt suddenly a little bit too hot under the collar. He didn’t expect things to take this turn. Maybe it was the fact no one he knew was around to see him. Maybe it was the fact Antonio was making this game easy for him. Whatever. Lovino would never admit out loud how much fun he was having with this.

“Last class today?” Lovino asked, unsure of what he was saying. Antonio nodded.

“Yeah, I’m going home now,” he said. “If I could, I would have given you a private lesson, since you’re already here and you don’t believe me when I say you’re a natural. But they need the ballroom.”

Antonio said so casually, as if he were talking about the weather, but Lovino could hear the open invitation between the lines. God. Elizabeta was right. His tango teacher was indeed flirting with him.

“No!” Lovino croaked. “I don’t-!”

Eyes half-lidded, Antonio watched him. There was an innocent smile plastered on his face, but Lovino doubted he was as naive as he looked.

“I mean, I didn’t come here to... to...” he trailed off.

“You said something about not having your home keys with you?” Antonio asked, giving him something to hang on to.

“Yes!” Lovino said. “I just wanted to-! Okay, I should leave. Maybe my brother is already home and-!”

As if to prove he wasn’t lying, Lovino grabbed his smartphone and dialed Feliciano’s number. His brother’s phone was off.

“You can always come at my place,” Antonio suggested. “I don’t live too far.”

Lovino didn't know what to say.

Throat dry, he furrowed his eyebrows in question.

"I don't think my roommates would mind," Antonio continued, and Lovino's face fell. What the hell. Did he really hope that-?

They didn't even know each other that long.

"O-kay?" Lovino hesitated.

"Hey, I don't bite, remember?" Antonio said.

"Do your roommates?" Lovino blurted and mentally facepalmed himself. He didn't mean to sound so flirty. What was wrong with him? Antonio, however, laughed.

"Probably," Antonio said. "But I'll deal with them if they try to."

And fuck, Antonio was charming. Lovino should head-butt him and make a run for it. His feet were rooted to the floor. In that moment he wanted nothing more than follow Antonio to his apartment.

"I'm counting on it," Lovino said, and no. Antonio's smile didn't make his heart skip a beat.

Lovino didn't know how he got himself in such a compromising situation. Antonio's apartment was ten minutes away from the dance school, and they walked side by side, filling the silence with anecdotes about themselves. That was how Lovino learned why Antonio, a Spaniard, started learning Argentine tango when he was just a kid.

"The town I grow up in was really small," Antonio said. "So imagine the stir within our conservative community when this man from Argentina settles down and decides to make a living by teaching us tango."

"How come did they let you take classes then?" Lovino asked, curious.

"They didn't know," Antonio said. "Not for the first six months, at least. I just happened to barge into Mr. Romero's class trying to get away from bullies. He took me in and let me follow his classes for free."

"For free?" Lovino asked, but then shook his head and looked at Antonio with eyes as wide as saucers. "You were bullied?"

"I used to piss people off when I was younger," Antonio explained.

"You still do," Lovino said, and Antonio laughed. "You pissed me off big time when you used me as your guinea pig just because Katyusha and Matthew couldn't do the basic steps properly."

"It's what teachers do," Antonio said.

“Just don’t do it again.”

“I can’t promise that.”

“Damn it.”

“Well, here we are,” Antonio suddenly said, and Lovino looked up at the building Antonio was pointing at.

He wondered what kind of people Antonio’s roommates were. When Antonio unlocked the door to his apartment, however, Lovino would have never expected *this*.

“Hey, Anto-!”

Lovino froze. The albino man standing behind the door stilled as well. Antonio tilted his head to the side in confusion.

“Goddammit,” Lovino cursed under his breath.

“So you accepted my offer after all?” Gilbert asked, a grin slowly forming on his lips. Lovino turned on his heels and made to run away, but Gilbert wrapped his hand around his arm to stop him.

“You know each other?” Antonio asked, pushing Lovino inside and closing the door behind them. Gilbert laughed.

“Do we know each other, he asks!” Gilbert exclaimed. “He’s my brother-in-law, man! We’re practically related.”

“Will you fucking stop that?” Lovino snapped. He heard someone drop a pan on the floor and he moved his head toward one of the doors. A blond head popped up from behind it.

“Your brother-in-law?” the man asked with a strong foreign accent. His blue eyes glanced at Lovino curiously, and Lovino decided to fix his gaze on the blond all over the other’s face.

“How do you know each other?” Antonio asked leaning closer to Lovino.

“I work for him,” Lovino whispered back while Gilbert pushed the other man into the living room.

“What a small world, huh?” Antonio said and laughed jovially.

“You don’t say,” Lovino muttered and sighed loudly.

“Why, hello there,” the blond man said reaching out and taking his hand in his. Lovino’s eyes bugged out when the other gently kissed his knuckles. “I’m Francis Bonnefoi.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Lovino cried and wiped his hand off onto his shirt.

“That’s a long name,” Francis said, irritated by Lovino’s antics. “Is the question mark your surname or...?”

“His name is Lovino,” Antonio intervened. “He’s my student.”

Gilbert’s smile became incredibly big, and Lovino groaned against his hands. He wanted the floor to swallow him up but Fate was having too much fun with him to grant his wish.

“Your student?” Gilbert asked.

“Oh, you are coming right on time, Tony,” Francis said, pushing Gilbert away and putting an arm around Antonio’s shoulders. “We were trying to make pizza.”

Lovino perked up.

“Pizza?” he repeated.

“I told him we should just order some,” Gilbert said. “He’s making a mess. The dough is too sticky.”

“For your information I’m a very good cook,” Francis said, affronted.

“Sticky?” Lovino repeated. “Oh, come on. Pizza is not that difficult! Let me see what you’ve done.”

And that was how Antonio’s roommates fell in love with Lovino Vargas.

Chapter End Notes

Of course, platonically. XD

So the Bad Touch Trio is finally reunited.

I hope you enjoyed reading this as much as I did writing it. :)

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

From that day on Lovino started going to class a little earlier than the rest of his group. Sometimes, Antonio was in the ballroom all on his own, preparing for his next class. Other times, he was dealing with more advanced learners.

It was fascinating to watch Antonio dance with the professionals; it was a sight Lovino couldn't tear his eyes from. The way he moved, so suavely, it was much more than simply beautiful. It was mesmerizing. The music seemed to envelope him whole, as if an invisible hand were guiding Antonio on the musical scale one step at the time. Lovino preferred to watch rather than learn how to tango.

He realized how cheesy that sounded only when Antonio caught him staring. And then there was a distinct sway to Antonio's hips and a playful smirk plastered on his face as he danced that Lovino found extremely annoying.

All in all, it was better when Antonio was alone. Deprived of a professional dancer to impress Lovino with, Antonio welcomed him with a big, naïve smile on his lips. Talking came much easier when Antonio looked more like an overgrown child rather than a world-class seducer.

Which begged the question –why Lovino of all people?

Not that Lovino was doing anything to stop the guy. Clearly, there was something wrong with his brain.

“So are you ready for the tango show tomorrow?” Antonio asked him that day, on the last class of the week. Lovino arched an eyebrow in puzzlement before realization sunk in.

“It's tomorrow?” Lovino asked. He had completely forgotten about it.

“Would you like to exchange numbers? I'll call you up to tell you where we shall meet.” Antonio asked instead, fumbling with his backpack and taking his phone out. “I can always pick you up, if you want.”

“Uh,” Lovino eloquently muttered. He carefully considered the offer. Lovino was almost tempted to decline, but why the hell not. Who can say no to a free ride? “It's like you are asking me out or something,” he blurted, blushing madly when Antonio tilted his head in confusion. Fuck. Damn his big mouth and Antonio's green eyes.

“Pretend I didn't say that out-loud,” Lovino stuttered, hanging his head low in embarrassment. Antonio chuckled.

“Ah, yes, m-my number,” Lovino continued, feeling his face getting hotter and hotter. He scratched his head and looked around, as if his number had been previously carved into the

wooden floor. The floorboards, however, sparkled. There was no sign of his dignity hidden between the wood grains.

Unaware of Lovino's increasing discomfiture, Antonio happily handed him his phone.

"Should I just...?" Lovino asked, looking up into Antonio's eyes. The two were standing incredibly close.

"It's not a date if you don't want it to be," Antonio said, as if that made fucking sense.

Lovino stared at him, unsure of how to proceed.

His tongue decided to peek out just in that moment to wet his dry lips, and Antonio hungrily followed his tongue with his eyes. Lovino fought against the urge to head-butt him and make a run for it.

"Who says I'm interested in dating you?" Lovino said, slowly taking Antonio's phone in his hands. His fingers hovered over the keypad. "It's just a tango show, right?"

"Right," Antonio said with the enthusiasm of a child. Lovino heaved a sigh and saved his number in Antonio's contact list, pressing the call button immediately after to get Antonio's number too. His phone rang twice back in the locker room, but it was too far away to hear it.

"You know, Francis can't stop talking about the pizza you baked last time," Antonio said, changing subject so abruptly that Lovino almost tripped over his own feet. "And I can't blame him. You're an awesome cook. I was getting tired of Francis' French cuisine and Gilbert's boiled cabbage."

"Disgusting," Lovino said handing Antonio's phone back to him. Their fingers brushed against each other, and Lovino willed himself to take a step backwards. They were standing too fucking close.

"Maybe I should return the favor one day," Antonio said.

"I'm not coming back to your apartment," Lovino retorted. "Those two give me the creeps. And I'm living with my brother. He's going to be all over you and I won't like it."

Antonio arched an eyebrow.

"I mean-!" Lovino snapped. "Oh, you know what I mean."

"Actually, I don't."

"You make a funny trio," Lovino said instead. "How do you know each other?"

"The apartment we are living in is actually Gilbert's. He was the one looking for flat mates, and I just met him when I checked the place out," Antonio explained. "I've known Francis since high school. He was the first one to talk to me when I moved here from Spain. He's a funny guy."

“He’s a fucking pervert,” Lovino said. “He tried to cup a feel.”

“Did he?” Antonio asked, tilting his head in amusement.

“And he did grab your ass twice!” Lovino exclaimed. “Don’t tell me you didn’t feel that!”

Antonio’s forehead creased, confusion written all over his face. Lovino’s jaw dropped.

“I guess I’m used to it?” Antonio laughed.

“I am tempted to ask you how, but I won’t.”

“Just warn me if he acts funny with you again,” Antonio said. “I’ll cut his hands right off.”

“I am flattered,” Lovino said, “but I don’t need your help, thank you. Who says I’m going to meet him again, anyway?”

“He wants to,” Antonio replied. “You left a very good impression on him.”

“Shit,” Lovino cursed and Antonio burst out laughing.

“You’re from Italy, right?” Antonio asked. Lovino wondered how his tango teacher could do that, jumping from one conversation to the other in a blink of the eye.

“Y-yeah?” Lovino half-answered, half-asked. He didn’t like the fascinated look on the other’s face. “My family moved here when I was really young,” Lovino continued, trying to focus his gaze on anything that wasn’t Antonio. “But I remember enough to say that it’s much more beautiful there than here. I would like to move back to Italy one day. Since my parents died, however, I am stuck here to take care of my brother. He’s still in college and I want to keep an eye on him until he graduates.”

“I see,” Antonio said.

“That’s why I started working for your stupid albino friend,” Lovino blurted. “The wage is really good.”

“He calls you your brother-in-law,” Antonio said, his voice getting just a tone deeper. Lovino was captivated.

“He’s a dumbass. At least he doesn’t call him daddy.”

The voice startled them both.

Lovino snapped his head to Elizabeta and groaned in frustration when she winked meaningfully at him. Roderich was right behind her, wearing a sympathizing expression Lovino was not used to see on his face.

“Lizzie!” Bella exclaimed, faking shock, and Lovino whipped around towards the door. Bella leant her back against it, her lips curling upwards in what could only be considered a delighted smile. For the love of tango, have they been eavesdropping?

“Hey, guys!” Antonio greeted. The predatory look was immediately gone from his face, and Lovino wondered why he didn’t notice how intensively Antonio had been gazing at him until the rest of the group finally made their appearance. He had been drawn to him like a moth to a flame, and now his face burned. Was he sweating? Darn it. He was.

“Are we late?” Katyusha asked barging into the classroom with Matthew on tow. Her incredibly big eyes scanned the room and rested on Antonio’s reassuring smile.

“No,” Antonio said. “Class starts now.”

Elizabeta’s pondering expression flickered between Antonio and Lovino, and Lovino casted his eyes down under her enquiring stare. He made a bee line to Bella and dragged her in the middle of the ballroom, feeling suddenly out of breath. Not that Bella made things any easier. Smile still plastered on her lips, she let Lovino put his hands on her when Antonio switched the CD recorder on.

“So...” Bella trailed off. Lovino ignored her.

“Eyes up!” Antonio ordered somewhere behind him. “Let’s do some warm up exercises.”

Lovino finally tore his eyes from the floor and looked up at his partner. She pulled him closer and waited for him to lead the dance.

“He likes you,” Bella whispered, casting a quick look at Antonio helping Katyusha and Matthew out. Lovino clicked his tongue.

“You’ve known Lizzie for like, what? One week? And now you’re acting like her. I thought you were better than that,” he said. Bella snickered.

“What can I say?” she teased him. “We must be soulmates.”

“Let’s just get this over with,” Lovino muttered and stepped forwards.

Lovino had no idea why he got so nervous when the time for Antonio to pick him up drew closer. By the way Feliciano kept glancing at him, even his oblivious brother had long realized that something was up. Lovino shouldn’t have agreed to it. He should have told Antonio to meet somewhere inconspicuous, maybe wear a pair of sunglasses and a trench coat, and hope no one was going to recognize them on the way.

It was just a tango show; it wasn’t even a stupid state championship. Antonio just kindly asked if he wanted to go, and Lovino stupidly agreed. There was nothing more to it. And yet Lovino couldn’t help thinking he was walking right into the lion’s den. What was worse, he didn’t give a fuck if the beast decided to take a bite. Damn it. The mental picture was totally unnecessary. Surely, there was something extremely wrong with his brain.

He almost jumped out of his skin when the doorbell rang. Feliciano glanced up from the magazine he was reading, and Lovino grabbed his keys and made a bee line to the door.

“Where are you going?” Feliciano inquired.

“Nowhere.”

“Who’s at the door?” Feliciano asked.

“No one.”

“Why are you looking me like that?”

“No reason.”

Feliciano slowly put the magazine down on his lap, and Lovino ran for the door, almost colliding into Antonio in his haste to get out. Two strong arms found their way around his waist, and Lovino looked up to Antonio’s amused face.

“Eager to go, aren’t we?”

“Shut up, you fucking bastard,” Lovino exclaimed, pushing him abruptly away and slamming the door behind him. “Let’s just go. Chop chop!” he ordered, grabbing Antonio by the shoulder.

“You look amazing,” Antonio said, out of the blue.

“For the love of God,” Lovino muttered, walking faster. Antonio’s laugh did nothing to calm his wrecked nerves.

“My car is in the other direction,” Antonio said pointing behind them.

Lovino abruptly halted and glanced behind his shoulder to see if Feliciano was peeking out the window to check up on him. He didn’t want to walk back to his house again. Feliciano would never let him live it down if he saw him, not after the scene Lovino made because of Ludwig.

“Shit.”

“Come on,” Antonio said, and Lovino’s eyes became impossibly wide when Antonio reached down for his hand and pulled him away. He let him guide him to the car, though, and whipped his hand free from the other’s grasp only when Antonio opened the door for him.

“I am not a fucking damsel-!”

“That’s not it,” Antonio interrupted him. “The handle is broken and it’s a little bit tricky to open the door.”

“Oh.”

“Come on, don’t be so nervous!” Antonio exclaimed amiably, walking around the car to get to the driver’s side. “It’s just a tango show. You’ll love it.”

Lovino mumbled something incoherent under his breath and hopped on. He fumbled with the seatbelt and did everything he could to avoid Antonio's gaze.

"The guy waving at us looks incredibly like you," Antonio suddenly said raising his hand in salute before he started the engine. Lovino's breath caught and he stared dumbfounded at Feliciano standing by the front door of their apartment waving enthusiastically at them.

"Did you wave back?" Lovino asked. "Tell me you didn't wave back."

"Well..." Antonio sheepishly said, pulling into the traffic.

"Damn it to hell and back," Lovino cursed. "That was my brother!"

"I would like to meet him someday," Antonio said checking in the rearview mirror. "He seems nice."

"You look nice too at first, but that doesn't mean you aren't a fucking bastard."

"Aw, you really think I look nice?" Antonio asked, honestly moved. Lovino hid his face in his hands. "I'm just kidding, Lovino. You're so cute when you blush."

"Stop hitting on me," Lovino said, but it was half-hearted. Antonio laughed and kept driving.

Lovino fiddled with his fingers, but when Antonio started talking about tango and his students, his heart finally slowed down. Antonio was incredibly passionate about dancing and Lovino couldn't help but admire the energy the other seemed to put into everything he did.

"I love to dance," Antonio said. "Tango, flamenco, paso doble, fandango, zarzuela, sevillana-!"

"Let me stop you there, that's all gibberish to me" Lovino cut him off, and Antonio laughed. "Why do you teach tango if you can do much more than that?"

"I used to teach flamenco and fandango too, but my boss said we didn't have enough students interested in this kind of traditional dances, so many classes were cancelled. Tango, however. It's very popular these days. I sometimes help a colleague of mine with other ballroom dances too."

"Not that I want to be in your shoes," Lovino said. "But your job is better than mine."

"It must be fun working with Gilbert," Antonio said.

"Why do you keep bringing him up?" Lovino asked. "Are you jealous or something?" he teased him after a moment of thought. Antonio let out a low, pensive sound as he parked the car, and Lovino impatiently waited for his response.

"Guess I am," Antonio whispered, and Lovino's hear skipped a beat.

"I'll open the door for you," Antonio said, smiling widely at him, and stepped out of the car. Lovino watched as Antonio fumbled with the door's handle to get it open. His stomach

clenched in a knot when Antonio leaned towards him, his collarbone peeking out from beneath his shirt, the man's natural scent filling his nostrils. This was getting out of hand, he thought. This was not supposed to be happening.

Antonio seemed completely unaware of the effect he was having on Lovino. He helped him out of the car, although it was completely unnecessary, and Lovino wordlessly followed Antonio to the sport building where the tango show was taking place.

There were more than one thousand people there and judging by the way Antonio greeted everyone, he seemed to know them all very well. Lovino had to hand it to him. Antonio got charisma, and that naive smile of his made everybody like him. Still, Lovino couldn't help thinking that there was more to Antonio than it met the eye, and that was what made him particularly intriguing.

They walked to their seats, and Lovino let the other do all the talking. Against all expectations, Lovino found himself enjoying the show. The woman that had danced with Antonio the day before was the third one to perform and it soon became obvious that she and her partner were one of the bests. Antonio explained the choreography to him and called each figure by its name.

"Maybe one day you and your friends will enter a tango competition," Antonio whispered in his ear at one point, making Lovino's hair stand on end. "You're going to rock, I'm sure of that."

"I thought we tango," Lovino said, trying hard not to lean closer to him. Antonio's laughter caressed his cheek. He felt Antonio's finger tuck a strand of hair behind his ear and wondered why he hadn't bitten his hand off yet.

"Look, that's called *salida cruzada*," Antonio said pointing at the pair dancing right in that moment. Lovino fixed his gaze on the two, fascinated. He was starting to fall in love with tango.

But most of all, he was falling a little bit more for his tango teacher too.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to TheCrystalFalls for accepting to be my beta for this fic. Beta is such hard work, we usually underestimate how precious these people are.

Chapter Five

Once upon a time there was a panda named Gilbert Beilschmidt.

The panda looked at Lovino, and it was the ugliest panda he had the pleasure to meet, if he had to be honest.

Eyebrows almost touching his hairline, Lovino's smile spread from ear to ear as he fought hard against the urge to roll on the office's floor laughing his ass off.

The panda, on the other hand, didn't seem to share his amusement.

"Shut up," Gilbert snapped.

"What the heck happened to you?" Lovino asked, making no attempt to repress his snort. Gilbert sank into the office chair next to his and shot him a murderous look with his bright red eyes. The area around them was black and swollen, and Lovino entertained the idea to repeatedly poke that visible darkness just to piss him further off. He kept his hands to himself, however; it would look weird if he started touching his boss' face under everyone's scrutinizing stares. Words had to suffice.

"They should use your picture as a scarecrow."

"Haha," Gilbert deadpanned and rolled his eyes to the ceiling, wincing as he did so. "You're hilarious."

Just when he was about to tease Gilbert a little more, Elizabeta barged into Lovino's cubicle holding a stack of papers in her arms.

The tension in the air grew suddenly thick.

Elizabeta greeted Lovino wholeheartedly but her smile froze on her lips at the sight of Gilbert. The two stared each other down for what felt like eons, until she broke the spell by slamming Lovino's paperwork on his desk with much more force than strictly necessary. Her red skirt fluttered as she stormed out, and Lovino whipped his head to look at Gilbert in disbelief.

“You fucking didn’t.”

“What?” Gilbert asked defensively.

“She’s married,” Lovino drawled.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Gilbert snapped, crossing his arms over his chest. Lovino swiveled his chair around and shot an annoyed glance at his paperwork before flashing Gilbert a wide, mocking grin.

“She’s strong, isn’t she?” Lovino asked, sneering. “Bet she threw the first punch the moment you asked her out.”

“No, that was the second one,” Gilbert said raising his finger to point at his left eye. “I told her her husband was a lucky motherfucker first,” he explained, gesturing to his right eye. Lovino threw his head back and laughed way too hard at Gilbert’s expense.

“This is a working place!” A guy sitting in the cubicle next to Lovino’s shouted, obviously annoyed by all the ruckus they were making. Lovino was ready to snap back a reply when Gilbert took control of the situation.

“Don’t make me come in there and fire you,” Gilbert retorted calmly but loud enough for everyone to hear. The guy immediately shut his mouth, and Lovino arched an eyebrow at him, clearly amused by the whole ordeal.

“You have a power kink or something?” Lovino mocked him.

“I would tell you to come to my office to find out,” Gilbert said, without missing a beat, “but I doubt Antonio will be happy about it,” he added, his lips curling upwards when Lovino almost fell from his chair.

Gilbert’s grin grew wider when Lovino’s eyes flickered around the room in search of a good comeback.

“Who cares what that idiot thinks,” Lovino weakly mumbled, pulling his chair to the desk. Gilbert scooted closer and leaned towards him in an unmistakably predatory manner.

“I’m not blind,” Gilbert whispered. “I saw the way you looked at him when you came by.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Lovino snapped, grabbing the first paper off the stack and burning holes in it with just his eyes.

“I didn’t know you were into dudes,” Gilbert said. “I bet that’s why you decided to take tango class, right? To ogle at his ass?” he asked, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“Fine, I won’t make fun of your panda look again!” Lovino kicked his chair. “Just get the fuck out of here. Don’t you have a meeting to attend to? Secretaries to importune... whatever you big guys do.”

Gilbert grinned. “Nothing is more fun than seeing you blush like a schoolgirl at the mere mention of Antonio’s name.”

“Go fuck yourself with a giant chili pepper.”

“Your list of insults is outstanding. I guess you’re really into dirty talk.”

“I’m warning you,” Lovino hissed, narrowing his eyes at him.

“Does Spanish turn you-?”

Gilbert should have expected the finger darting towards his eye. The loud cry that escaped the albino’s lips as soon as Lovino’s index found his tender skin made the latter’s heart flutter with joy. The employees working in the adjacent cubicles peeked above the wing panels to look at them, and Lovino flashed them a bright, charming smile.

“GILBERT!” Ludwig’s booming voice echoed off the walls. Gilbert slapped his hand over his aching eye and muttered something under his breath.

“I hate you, fucker,” Gilbert hissed, standing up.

“Right back at ya,” Lovino retorted, and they flipped each other off at the same time.

Gilbert huffed, but there was the smallest hint of a smile in his otherwise angry expression.

“I guess we’re even,” Gilbert said, lowering his hands. “Oh, whatever,” he exclaimed immediately afterwards, taking a step forwards to pet Lovino’s hair, who slapped his hand instantly away. “You’re my brother-in-law! I can’t stay mad at you. Of course, it’s still a mystery to me why Antonio wants to tap you, but...”

Lovino gulped down his question. *Antonio wanted what?*

“Just leave before I kick your ass,” Lovino snapped, trying to hide his sudden uneasiness.

“You wish you were that strong, sweetie,” Gilbert said with a wink and walked out before Lovino could hurl his stapler at him.

Lovino waited to make sure he wouldn’t return before he started on his daily paperwork. After Gilbert’s short visit, however, focusing on boring numbers and figures turned out to be much harder than usual. His heart was running madly in his chest. Damn. He was in deep shit if *Gilbert* noticed.

After the tango show, Antonio hadn’t asked him out again. He didn’t need to, really, as they saw each other at least thrice a week in tango class. Every time, Lovino swore to himself that it was going to be the last time he went earlier to class just to have a one on one conversation with him, and every time he failed to honor his own promise. Antonio was alluring. An idiot, sure. But incredibly sexy.

Lovino, you have got to get a grip on yourself. He knew the symptoms, but couldn’t run a diagnostic, making it incredibly difficult to find a solution to his problem.

He didn't see Gilbert for the rest of the day, but his words rang loud and clear in Lovino's head throughout his boring routine. Even when it was time for him to go to tango class hours later, Lovino couldn't stop picturing Gilbert's knowing look in his head.

Lovino had been in the same room with Antonio and Gilbert just once, and yet Gilbert had seemed particularly perceptive of the way his friend acted with his employee. There was no way they haven't talked about him, and being the center of a hypothetical conversation between Antonio, Gilbert and Francis made him incredibly uneasy.

He had to take matters into his own hands. This was getting out of control, and that was a good reason to break the promise he made with himself for the thousandth time.

When Lovino pushed the doors to the dance school open, he was the only student present. The girl at the reception greeted him with a nod of her head, and Lovino rushed up the stairs to class in order to avoid any awkward question she might throw his way.

Fortunately or unfortunately, Antonio was already there, fiddling with the CD player. Lovino took a hesitant step inside the empty ballroom and the wooden tiles creaked under his weight, alerting Antonio of his presence.

"Lovino!" Antonio greeted him enthusiastically. He put down the CD he was holding and crossed the room to him in a couple of strides.

Drawn to him, Lovino met him half-way, letting out a shaky breath when he looked up into beaming green eyes. The corner of Antonio's lips slightly twitched upwards, a flicker of amusement crossed his face, and Lovino wondered for the thousandth time since they first met how seriously Antonio was taking whatever was going on between the two of them.

The big elephant in the room tapped his wrist in annoyance and arched an eyebrow when Lovino imperceptibly took a step backwards.

Antonio's scent was inebriating. The heat emanating from the other's body made everything look hazy, and Lovino would be a liar if he said that didn't scare him.

"Early as usual, huh?" Antonio asked, breaking the silence. "Is your brother not home again?"

"Yes," Lovino said, hating how his voice shook. He coughed to clear his throat. "He should move out already. It's like we're not even sharing an apartment anymore."

"I thought you would like that," Antonio said, walking back towards the CD player.

"I absolutely do," Lovino defended himself, "but I thought it would be after college and not because he thought my fucking boss was eye candy."

"I've met Gilbert's brother," Antonio said, discarding one CD and fumbling with his backpack in search of another one. "He's kind of scary, if you ask me."

"I know, right?" Lovino asked, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. Antonio sat down cross legged and emptied his backpack's contents on the floor. CDs, coins, a pair of keys and a picture of a

girl Lovino never saw before scattered around him, coloring the otherwise plain brown ballroom floor.

“What are you searching for?” Lovino asked, drifting his eyes to Antonio’s back.

“My mother’s favorite CD,” he promptly replied. “I thought it would be nice to practice with that today. Francis must have taken it.”

The elephant in the room coughed.

“Hey, err...” Lovino started, “About him. Have you been talking about me with them... uhh... with Gilbert?” Lovino blurted, regretting his question immediately after. Antonio looked up from the floor with a confused expression on his face.

“Huh?”

The way Antonio tilted his head to the side was going to be the end of him.

If Lovino had been just a little bit bolder, he would have leaned in and pressed his lips against Antonio’s. Just to see what he tasted like. It would be so easy.

“Why should Gilbert talk about you?” Antonio asked, pushing his things into his backpack again and standing up to face Lovino’s head on. A hint of jealousy flashed across Antonio’s eyes, and Lovino smirked at the reaction. His triumph was cut short, however. It didn’t take a genius to see that Gilbert’s comment and Antonio’s oblivious attitude didn’t match, and Lovino looked down at his hands, unsure of what to do with them. His smile slowly disappeared from his face. He was probably reading too much into it.

“He said some pretty interesting stuff today, that’s all,” Lovino said. “It doesn’t fucking matter.”

“Oh, well, I’m curious now,” Antonio said, and Lovino’s breath caught when his gaze met Antonio’s fiery one.

If Antonio kept that up, Lovino would not be responsible for his actions.

“I just wonder if he was telling the truth or if he was messing with my head,” Lovino said. His voice was low, barely above a whisper, but Antonio held his gaze, as if he has spoken loud and clear. They were just a breath away, and Lovino’s ears started buzzing with an annoying sound that covered his rapid heartbeat. His muscles tensed when Antonio’s hand slid around his waist.

“Hey, Lovino, wanna dance with me?” Antonio asked, abruptly changing subject. “Consider it a warm up. You’re incredibly early and we’ve got time.”

“I could leave and come back later,” Lovino protested, conscious of Antonio’s proximity. Their chests brushed against each other, and Lovino watched fascinated as Antonio adjusted himself so that Lovino could take the lead.

The sudden dancing arrangement was completely out of the blue, but Lovino was actually glad for the distraction. Mind blank, he let Antonio move his arms around his waist.

“Are you sure you want to turn down my offer?” Antonio said with a smug smirk. “It’s free.”

“There’s no music.”

“We don’t need that.”

“I know just the basic steps.”

“It’s more than enough.”

Lovino shut his mouth and brushed his right hand along Antonio’s arm. He felt Antonio’s bicep flex under his palm and it kept moving upwards until their fingers intertwined. Antonio breathed an encouraging word on his skin and Lovino took a step forwards just to have something to focus on that wasn’t the other’s lips. He immediately cast his eyes down, surprised when their feet started moving rhythmically together.

“This is so awkward,” Lovino muttered. “I don’t know why I’m doing this,” he added and his stomach clenched when Antonio laughed.

“Salida simple, Lovino,” Antonio said. Lovino complied. “Did Gilbert upset you?” he asked, voice husked. Lovino didn’t dare to look at him in the eye.

“He... confused me,” he admitted.

“Hmm...” The soft sound made shivers ran down Lovino’s spine. “Do you remember position four?”

“It’s like this, right?”

“No, that’s a side step. Position *dos*.”

“The fuck is this shit,” Lovino swore under his breath, earning another honest laugh from Antonio.

“Gilbert doesn’t trash talk, just so you know,” Antonio said pulling Lovino suddenly closer and letting go of his arm to raise Lovino’s chin with his fingers. “Eyes on me.”

“Yeah, go and make it worse, will you,” Lovino snapped and his mouth went dry when Antonio winked at him. He lowered his head again. “Anyway, he seemed to know what he was talking about.”

“And yet you don’t give me a clue,” Antonio whispered, raising Lovino’s chin to his eye level again. “How can I confirm or deny what he said, if you don’t tell me? Side step.”

“Don’t try to dip me, shithead, like last time, or I’m going to kick you in the nuts.”

“I won’t. I’m not leading right now.”

At Antonio's words, Lovino abruptly stopped in his tracks, and Antonio moved his foot away before Lovino could step on him.

"You should practice more on your *caminadas*," Antonio said, finally letting him go. Lovino's hands lingered on Antonio's waist just a moment longer before he pushed him softly away.

"What the fuck are we doing?" Lovino asked instead, looking at Antonio straight in the eyes.

"I thought I was teaching you tango," Antonio said, confused. "Am I not doing it right?"

Lovino's throat went completely dry.

"I feel like you want to do more than that with me," Lovino said. Antonio remained strangely silent. "And you don't even know me. Is it just going to be one-time thing or..."

"Depends on you," Antonio said. Lovino's eyes widened in surprise. "If you want we can practice tango every time before class."

"I'm not talking about tango, you fucking moron," Lovino snapped, taking a large step backwards. His skin was burning, his arms itched to feel Antonio's body again, his lips were tingling. He tried to look away, but Antonio was like a magnet, pulling him closer.

"I know, but you're shaking. I'm trying to calm you down."

Lovino looked down at his hands, blinking in surprise when he realized that he was indeed shaking like a leaf. "What the actual fuck."

"I can't say I haven't given it a thought," Antonio said, and that naïve smile stretching across his face drove Lovino completely crazy. "But I really shouldn't."

"What if we..." Lovino blurted, biting his bottom lip before he could let out what really was on his mind. There was a flicker of understanding in Antonio's eyes that Lovino was utterly grateful for.

Lovino waited. He could feel the anger boiling up inside him. At Antonio. At Gilbert. At himself. Then Antonio smiled at him, and all his rage vanished into thin air, as if the right thing to do had never truly mattered, leaving room for something else. Something much scarier.

"I'm heading straight home after class," Lovino said.

"Okay."

They didn't talk until the rest of the group joined them.

"Tango is not all about leading and following some steps," Antonio said when the class finally reunited. "It's about showing emotions too. It's a sensual dance for a reason. It

expresses something, it speaks to you. Steps don't make any sense if all dancers do is keeping a poker face."

"Isn't it weird, though?" Katyusha spoke up, blushing madly when all eyes turned to her. "I mean, I feel like I'm making funny faces. People will think this is a joke and won't take me seriously."

"They would be too concentrated on your feet to pay attention on your face," Elizabeta said. "I wouldn't worry."

"You don't need to make faces to express emotion," Antonio reassured her. "Bella," he called, turning to the blond, "would you mind helping me out with this?"

"Sure," Bella said stepping over to him. She threw a furtive glance at Lovino before she put her arms around Antonio's shoulders. Antonio smiled encouragingly at her before he focused his attention to the class again.

"In tango there are many ways to express emotions," Antonio said and gently pressed his cheek with Bella's. "You can dance cheek to cheek, forehead to forehead," he added moving his head accordingly. Bella followed his example and giggled when their noses bumped. "Even a gentle embrace can convey passion."

Lovino stared as Antonio gently went over the basic steps with Bella. Antonio stared right back at him, cradling the blond in his arms as if she were a fragile flower. Bella followed his every instruction and let him move her arms around so they could show the rest of the class the various types of embrace. Antonio explained every technique, but Lovino was not really listening. Hazel met green, again and again and again.

It was a wonder how Antonio could keep teaching with a straight face.

But he was good. Bella giggled nervously whenever she crossed Antonio's fiery stare. Elizabeta nodded in understanding. Roderich coughed. Matthew and Katyusha fidgeted in their spots.

"With that in mind let's go over the basic steps again," Antonio suddenly said, letting Bella go back to her partner.

"This is harder than I imagined," Bella said when they moved together to position zero. Lovino shot a glance over to Antonio before he put his hands on Bella's arms.

"Tango sucks," he agreed. "Don't laugh at me if I look constipated," he joked and Bella laughed softly.

"You too," she said. Antonio put on some music and they started dancing. Lovino tried to concentrate on the steps, but his eyes kept flickering towards his tango teacher, who was correcting Matthew and Katyusha's posture.

"Should we dance cheek to cheek?" Bella asked. "It was the less embarrassing one."

"Hmm..." Lovino willed himself to look at her. "Yes, why not."

Bella was soft. She was in no way a delicate flower, but it felt nice to have her in his arms. They were getting good at it, but they were still newbies in comparison to Antonio and his advanced students. Lovino wondered what it would feel like to dance with him at such a high level. To feel his leg around his. Moving forehead to forehead. Holding each other close--

“Wow, you are really getting the hang of it,” Bella whispered against his cheek. “Just warn me first if you’re going to kiss me.”

“Huh?” Lovino asked. There was a flush of red on her cheeks that looked incredibly cute on her. A part of him wanted to push her away, blurt something incomprehensible and run away, but something in the back of his head told him that if he did that he wouldn’t be in the same room with Antonio for the rest of the evening. A funny thought that glued him to the spot.

The abrupt movement made Bella slip, and Lovino caught her in mid-air before she fell flat on the floor.

“Watch your step!” Antonio warned them.

“Is everything alright, Lovino? I was joking,” Bella said, furrowing her eyebrows in worry. Antonio strode over to them, and Lovino looked up towards him, his lips parting slightly when Antonio’s hand brushed against his shoulder blades.

“Back straight, Lovino,” Antonio said. “Your steps are too wide, Bella.”

Bella’s heart skipped a beat when she felt Lovino shiver against her. Antonio told her to practice more on her backwards cross steps before he walked away to check on Elizabeta and Roderich instead.

“I need to look down for this,” Bella said, moving slightly away from Lovino’s weak hold.

“Hmm...” Lovino mumbled.

“You should tell him,” Bella whispered, but when Lovino furrowed his eyebrows in question, she decided not to push the matter further. She smiled at him, and they kept practicing in silence.

Lovino couldn’t concentrate on tango much. He was impatient to go back home. Excitement poured out of him whenever his gaze met Antonio’s one. For Bella’s sake, he tried hard to focus on his steps, but his heart wasn’t really in it. Every sound in the room increased in volume. Katyusha’s nervous laughter, Elizabeta’s heels tapping on the wooden floor, even Roderich coughing was deafening.

He was glad when class finally ended.

“See you next time!” Bella greeted him, sharing an eloquent look with Elizabeta, who arched an eyebrow in puzzlement. Lovino averted his gaze and raised a hand in salute, running out of the locker rooms as fast as his legs could carry him.

What was wrong with him?

How could he even suggest something like that to his tango teacher?

And yet, when he finally stepped back into his familiar living room and plopped down on his couch, he hoped Antonio would take up on the offer. He groaned against his hands and hid his face in the cushions.

This was going to kill him.

The minutes ticked by.

Without Feliciano in the house, it was eerily quiet. Lovino entertained the idea of calling him and ruin his date –or whatever he was doing-- but then thought better of it. He didn't want him back home yet.

When the doorbell finally rang, Lovino's heart jumped in his throat, a wave of different emotions splashed over him, leaving him breathless.

"Hey," Antonio whispered when Lovino finally opened the door, looking uncharacteristically nervous.

"Hey," Lovino said, letting him in.

"I just wanted to tell you that-" Antonio began but the words died in his throat as soon as he looked down into Lovino's eyes. Yes, Lovino wanted to reassure him, it was a fucking mistake coming here. But--

Lovino grabbed his shirt and pulled him further inside. Screw this, he thought. Skin hot, he tugged Antonio's collar and crashed their mouths together, throwing inhibitions to the wind. A bolt of lightning struck through their bones. Antonio was quick to react.

He tasted great.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Once again, a big thank you to TheCrystalFalls for the beta!

I wonder if I should finally change the rating from Teen to Mature. I'm using the F word way to much.

Chapter Six

Lovino Vargas didn't give a damn about the world; not right now, and probably not for the next century either. The world could come to an end, zombies could crawl up from the sewers and spread chaos, Gilbert could lie down on the floor in his cubicle and start questioning him about Elizabeta, ask him if it was a good idea to ask her out again and Lovino wouldn't care less.

Honestly, he didn't give a flying fuck.

Elizabeta could pace around in his cubicle for a good half an hour after Gilbert left, she could complain about their precious vice-president, whine about her marriage, end her speech with a good thought comment about men's stupidity and Lovino wouldn't bother to defend either his masculinity or his intelligence. He didn't give a flying fuck about that either.

Not now, at least.

In fact, all his mind could focus on was Antonio Fernández Carriedo, tango teacher, happy-go-lucky bastard, all too oblivious roommate, and damn good lover.

Lover?

He probably shouldn't call him that. Antonio didn't come out from some kind of cheesy romance novel, where the protagonist wears less than they should and poses like a whore on the cover.

That's a mental picture Lovino didn't need right now.

You know what? He is not going to call him anything.

Period.

But fuck he was a good---

Teacher. He was a good teacher.

“Are you even listening to me?” Elizabeta asked. Lovino grunted something in response and kept filling out the PDF file glaring at him from his computer screen. He clicked on one of the boxes and typed a word. Was he supposed to fill this out in Italian? He wasn’t sure. Beilschmidt wasn’t going to notice the difference anyway.

He might realize ‘hjahiw’ is not in the Italian-English dictionary, though. Did he really type that? Fuck. He should check this whole thing out again. Good lord, he wrote ‘Antonio’ where he was supposed to type the CEO’s name. Shit--

“Feliciano is going to marry Ludwig,” Elizabeta announced.

“That’s nice,” Lovino replied repeatedly clicking on the backspace button to erase any evidence of his stupidity. A loud cry escaped his throat when Elizabeta grabbed the back of his office chair and violently turned Lovino around.

“Spit it out! What is wrong with you?” Elizabeta asked kneeling down to his eye level and giving his shoulders a painful squeeze. Lovino grabbed a pen from his desk and pointed it menacingly at her, but Elizabeta just narrowed her gaze, unimpressed.

“What?” he asked in defense, not lowering his hand yet.

“You’ve been acting weird for the past three weeks,” Elizabeta said. “You don’t mind Gilbert hanging around in your cubicle, you don’t complain about Feliciano anymore and you even smiled at the CEO yesterday when he greeted you good morning.”

“I did not,” Lovino spat affronted. Elizabeta raised an eyebrow.

“You are smiling now,” she said.

“I am not!” Lovino exclaimed slamming a hand over his mouth. Damn his facial muscles. Was he smiling, really?

Fuck. This was probably a trap and he fell into it like a drunkard.

“I’ve seen that dopey look before,” Elizabeta said, leaning closer to him to study him better. “Just admit you’re having the hots for someone.”

“I don’t,” Lovino mumbled behind his hand.

He definitely didn’t.

Whatever Lovino and Antonio started was nothing important. It was just a way to ease the apparent tension between them, and since it worked once, neither of them complained when it happened a second time, or a third. It was actually easier to concentrate on work and tango after coming to terms with their mutual attraction. There was nothing more to it, though, and Lovino surely wasn’t going to consider Antonio as his boyfriend or something just as preposterous just because they slept together once or twice. No, that was ridiculous. Lovino didn’t have the hots for Antonio. They just happen to enjoy spending some quality time together.

It was impossible that Lovino was smiling. This was nothing worth smiling over, after all.

“You are getting this completely wrong,” Lovino said, still covering his mouth, just in case his lips were indeed betraying him. “I was just picturing Gilbert’s murder in my head. It was fucking hilarious.”

Elizabeta arched both eyebrows in question and finally let go of him. Feeling safe, Lovino lowered both hands and waited for Elizabeta to move away from his personal space.

She didn’t.

What happened instead was that her face became an interesting shade of white.

“Tell me it’s not true,” Elizabeta asked.

“What?” Lovino cried, completely taken aback. Eyes wide as saucers, Elizabeta swallowed loudly before she tentatively asked:

“Are you harboring feelings for Gilbert? Oh, my God! Is this why he keeps coming here? Are you two-!” she squeezed Lovino’s shoulders again, and Lovino winced when her nails dug into his skin through the plain shirt he was wearing.

“*What?*”

“Was it consensual? Tell me it was consensual!”

“Are you on drugs?” Lovino shouted, slapping her hands away. “Let go of me, damnit! You are going to ruin my shirt.”

“That sounded extremely gay,” Elizabeta said, the ghost of a smile on her lips.

“And you sound extremely out of your mind. Do you seriously believe I would ever think of Gilbert fucking Beilschmidt in any other situation that doesn’t involve a shovel and a freshly dug up grave?”

“You two are close,” Elizabeta said, shrugging, “and it’s obvious he likes you.”

Lovino stared at her as if she had just sprouted a pair of antlers before he shook his head and turned around back to his paperwork. He definitely wasn’t going to bother. Let Lizzie believe what she wanted! He had more serious issues at hand right now.

“Who is it then?” Elizabeta asked, crossing her arms over her chest and looming over him like Death herself. Lovino tried to focus on his PDF form instead, tapping the pen against his desk in a futile attempt to show his irritation.

“Come on, Lovino,” Elizabeta groaned, “you know I’ll figure it out sooner or later!”

“There is nothing to figure out!” Lovino exclaimed, eyes fixed on the screen and hand strategically positioned on his cheek to hide any sign of blushing.

“So you are just into PDF files and signing paperwork, huh?” Elizabeta joked. Lovino didn’t bother to come out with a comeback and Elizabeta sighed. “They must be a pretty good lay,” she said, chuckling. “Shake their hand for me next time you see them, will you? It’s been a while since I saw you smile so openly. I like it,” she announced in a strangely soft voice.

By the time Lovino turned his head to face her head on, she was already gone. Having nothing else to focus on that wasn’t work, Lovino fidgeted in his office chair and tried to make himself comfortable. His skin was itching; it was difficult to suppress the urge to run after her and try to defend his honor.

Hah! That’s hilarious. He had no honor to defend. He clearly lost his mind three weeks prior, letting Antonio into his apartment like that.

But it would have been madness not to do anything about it either.

His life had certainly improved after that.

In tango class, Lovino could constantly feel Antonio’s gaze on him, but knowing he could have him whenever he wanted, it was easy to dance with Bella as if nothing was the matter. Eyes on Bella and feet moving as if own their own accord, they sure were making some progress.

They definitely felt more at ease with each other, and it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say they were now the best of buddies. Bella was fun to be with, a sweet girl with a shrewd tongue that could dodge Lovino’s naturally flirty nature and deal with his unexpected moodiness. Dancing with her became second nature to him and vice versa.

Matthew and Katyusha too were getting better at tango, even if she stepped on his feet every once in a while. Her J-sized breasts would have been a curse for any dancer, but they were doing well, all things considered. Antonio was obviously satisfied by their progress and doted on them, encouraging to do even better the next time. He saw potential in them that Lovino failed to see, but it would have been an ass move to say his doubts aloud. If Antonio was happy, everybody was happy.

Elizabeta and Roderich, on the other hand, were getting nowhere.

He clearly didn’t want to be there, while Elizabeta pushed him around like a puppet on a string. They were not working out, and Lovino could see how frustrated Antonio was with them both.

For such a happy-go-lucky guy, he lost temper pretty easily, especially if whatever angered him had tried to mess with something he was extremely passionate about. Lovino wondered what else could rile him up. He had never seen Antonio being angry at anyone and curiosity nibbled at the corners of his consciousness. Those green orbs lighted up when he was happy; they honestly were a window to his soul and emotions. Surely, anger would make him intimidating. In the few times they slept together, Lovino had never dared to look at Antonio straight in the eyes. Who knew what they looked like then? He was afraid to find out.

“Lizzie!”

The sudden cry pushed Lovino out of his thoughts. Bella abruptly halted in his arms and he almost stepped on her, unaware that Antonio had asked them all to stop dancing.

“What’s wrong?” Lovino whispered and Bella meaningfully tilted her chin towards Roderich and Elizabeta. Face red, Roderich pushed his glasses up his nose and coughed behind his hand in embarrassment. Katyusha was kneeling down next to Elizabeta, helping her to stand up, while the latter waved her hand in the air, as if to reassure everyone she was doing fine.

“Are you hurt?” Roderich asked stepping closer to her but she stopped him with a sharp glare.

“What happened?” Lovino asked, but Bella shrugged, puzzlement clear all over her face.

“I’m fine,” Elizabeta spat, standing back up.

“Maybe you should change partners for the rest of the class,” Antonio said and Lovino’s eyes immediately found his. Their tango teacher flashed him a soft smile before he focused his attention back on Elizabeta and Roderich again. “You clearly have issues that can’t be resolved right now. You’ll end up getting hurt if you keep going like this.”

“I am doing fine!” Elizabeta exclaimed. “I can dance with whomever,” she added, a little petulantly. Lovino blinked at her in shock. This was not the Elizabeta he knew. Something was off. He drifted his eyes to Roderich, but the guy just stood further aside, answering Matthew’s question with a curt nod of his head.

“No, you can’t,” Antonio said, lifting the corners of his lips upwards in what should have been a reassuring smile. It wasn’t. “Tango might be a dance like any other, where you learn the basic steps and make a good impression on a newbie. It’s true that anyone can copy the figures but it’s impossible to mimic the grace and passion that comes along with it. For that you need a partner you feel close to you. Look at Katyusha and Matthew, for example. Their progress derives from their mutual trust.”

Elizabeta shot the two a quick glance and then crossed her arms over her chest. She was getting defensive, and Lovino knew she was going to put up a fight Antonio would never win with words.

“I beg to differ,” Roderich said, unexpectedly. “Dancing doesn’t always require chemistry between the two partners. It’s just following the rules and doing a good job with it. Music, on the other hand-!”

“But music too follows some rules, doesn’t it?” Elizabeta spat, taking everyone completely aback. Roderich sniffed and straightened the collars of his shirt just to do something with his hands.

“I think you are both missing the point here,” Bella said but shut up when both of them shot her a disapproving look. Her gaze narrowed, but Antonio stepped up before things between the three of them could escalate the situation.

“You need to follow some rules in order to dance, but you need to feel the music too if you want to it correctly,” Antonio said swiftly moving across the dancefloor to stand by Lovino’s side, “and it would all be a waste of time if you hate your partner with a passion.”

Lovino arched an eyebrow in question and let out a cry when Antonio grabbed his arm and pulled him close.

“Lovino is better at following the rhythm than any of us,” Antonio said. “I know all about tango. Its rules, as Roderich called them, are no secret to me.”

“Don’t you *dare*,” Lovino hissed between gritted teeth, but Antonio’s arms were already on his shoulders. The music kept playing softly in the background, and Lovino couldn’t help but think how anticlimactic that felt. Elizabeta’s rage at the world, Roderich’s disappointment, Bella’s slightly pissed off attitude stood completely in contrast to the passionate, loving music coming out from the CD player.

What’s more, Antonio’s hands on him were steady in confront to his shaky ones. Despite everything that was going on, Antonio managed to keep a calm head.

On the other hand, Lovino didn’t want to be there; not with all of those eyes staring down at him. Lovino could pretend as much as he wanted but there were some things he did give a fuck about. His reputation, for instance.

And right now he was trying hard not to show the world how Antonio’s presence affected him.

“If we didn’t feel at ease with each other,” Antonio was saying, “this would never work. No matter how well we know our steps or how easily we can move in sync with the music.”

“Antonio,” Lovino warned him, looking up at him.

“Just dance with me, Lovino,” Antonio whispered, leaning closer to his ear. Whatever Lovino wanted to say died in his throat at that. With a slight nod, Lovino moved his right leg forwards, closing his eyes to focus on the music only. He didn’t want to look anyone in the eye. If Antonio wanted to prove a point to the rest of the class, Lovino would be somewhere else with his mind. His body relaxed against Antonio’s.

His heartbeat, however, betrayed him.

His heart pumped faster and faster each step he took.

Antonio kept up with him, pulling him closer to his body. His fingers trailed a path from Lovino’s shoulders to his elbows, gently as a butterfly kiss. The pace of the music increased slightly and Lovino moved accordingly, feeling his lips quirk upwards when Antonio followed his step smoothly.

“Let’s do a simple *contrapaso*, Lovi,” Antonio whispered.

Lovino nodded. He wanted to press his forehead in the crook of the other’s neck, but refrained from doing anything that could diverge Antonio’s attention from their dancing. A

hand found his cheek and Lovino leaned into it, letting his eyes flutter open. Antonio was just a breath away from his.

Should he keep dancing?

Once again Lovino wondered why he never dared to look into Antonio's eyes those few times they were completely alone. They could very well be alone right now. Elizabeta, Matthew, Roderich, Katyusha and even Bella could fade in the background and Lovino wouldn't notice. The CD player screeched suddenly, reminding Lovino what they were actually doing.

Antonio lowered his hands; his fingers brushed against Lovino's neck and down to his chest. The CD player started to sound like a broken record, and Antonio shot a glance over to it with a small huff of irritation.

The smile that stretched across Lovino's lips was totally unintentional.

"Oh."

Lovino snapped his head towards Elizabeta, who was staring at him with eyes wide as saucers. Roderich coughed in embarrassment and stepped closer to Elizabeta, who didn't flinch away from him as she did mere minutes before.

"This is tango," Antonio whispered, and Lovino's body moved, drawn to his voice. This was ridiculous. *He* was ridiculous.

"Can we try again?" Elizabeta asked, blushing slightly when Antonio tore his eyes away from Lovino to look at her. "Same partners, though."

"Yes, of course," Antonio said and walked away to the broken CD player, leaving Lovino to Bella again. Lovino watched him press the pause and play button a couple of times, mumbling something under his breath, and felt his stomach turn into a knot. This was getting ridiculous.

Bella regarded him with a raised eyebrow, but Lovino didn't dignify her with a look as he walked backwards to stand in front of her again. He just raised his right hand, silently asking her if she wanted to dance, and she accepted by pressing her body against his.

"You're gorgeous when you smile," Bella whispered.

"You too," he said without thinking, feeling proud of himself when Bella blushed and stopped talking for the rest of class.

Later in the evening, right when Lovino was ready to bid everyone goodnight and go home, he climbed down the stair and bumped into Feliciano's toothy grin.

"Feli!" Lovino shouted in surprise.

"Hi!" Feliciano exclaimed, waving madly. "I wanted to come earlier and watch you dance tango, but that cute lady over there," he said pointing at the receptionist, "forbid me from

disrupting class, which is stupid,” he whispered in a conspirator tone, “because I would have just sat in a corner completely in silence. How could I ever disrupt class if I don’t do anything?”

“What are you doing here?” Lovino asked instead.

“Let’s walk home together,” Feliciano replied, a little bit too quickly. Under Lovino’s enquiring stare, Feliciano winced and shoved his hands into his pockets in a very suspicious manner. His face brightened immediately up when Elizabeta appeared right next to Lovino, with Roderich and Antonio on tow.

“Feliciano!” she exclaimed the moment he noticed him. Feliciano walked around Lovino to pull her into a crushing hug and then proceeded to do the same with Roderich, who surprised everyone by gracing Feliciano with a kind smile.

“Long time no see,” Roderich said. “How’s college?”

“Not bad,” Feliciano replied absentmindedly, his attention stolen by the man standing awkwardly next to them. Lovino’s eyes flickered between Feliciano and Antonio, feeling the panic rise inside his chest. As expected, Feliciano grinned in recognition.

“I remember you!” Feliciano exclaimed pointing at Antonio with his index finger. “You came to-!”

“He’s our tango teacher!” Lovino rushed to explain, grabbing Feliciano by the shoulder and pulling him away from the other man. Elizabeta and Roderich arched their eyebrows in unison, the puzzled look on their faces so identical Lovino wondered how much they have rubbed off on each other without them noticing.

“Oh, yes,” Feliciano said, smile still plastered on his face. Antonio stretched his hand and took Feliciano’s in his.

“I’m Antonio,” he introduced himself, shooting a quick amused look Lovino’s way.

“I’m Lovino’s brother, Feliciano,” the other said, squeezing Antonio’s fingers warmly.

Lovino’s scowl deepened. If Elizabeta found out Antonio had taken him out that one day to the tango competition, she would immediately realize there was more than met the eye between the two of them. Feliciano, however, was not the type of guy who could keep a secret, especially when he had no clue it was supposed to be one. Throat dry and itchy, Lovino prayed this was not going to end with him becoming the laughing stock of their city.

“It’s been a while since we’ve seen you, Feli,” Elizabeta said. “It’s almost time for dinner. Should we go eat something together? It’s a nice evening today and we sure need to catch up,” she added, glancing at Lovino for a fleeting moment.

“That would be nice,” Roderich agreed.

“Of course, you are invited too, Antonio,” Elizabeta said, flashing him a wide smile. “Since you and Lovino are so close, it’s only natural you come too.”

Lovino gagged. Antonio blinked at Elizabeta, completely taken aback, and furrowed his eyebrows in question.

“We are not close,” Lovino blurted, his chest tightening up with dread. He coughed, hoping she got the message, but she just laughed heartily in response.

“Nonsense,” Elizabeta said. A look of pure mischief flashed across her face and Lovino suddenly hated her with a passion. “The way you dance with each other is so hot, one wonders if you two are not already f-!”

“What the hell do you want from me?” Lovino cried, shooting Feliciano a glare when his brother burst out laughing.

“I’m just kidding,” she said and wrapped an arm around Antonio’s. “But the offer still stands. Do you want to join us for dinner?”

Antonio shared another look with Lovino, but the latter avoided his gaze, feeling his face burn at the unwanted attention.

“I heard so many things about you!” Feliciano exclaimed. “Now that I got to meet the famous tango teacher, I would be really sad if you don’t join us for dinner.”

That was totally uncalled for, Lovino thought. He turned towards Roderich for help, but the older man just shrugged, looking as confused as he was.

“Oh, is that so? Good things I hope?” Antonio said, meeting Lovino’s gaze.

“The best,” Feliciano said. To say Lovino wanted to strangle him would be a huge understatement. He didn’t remember ever talking about Antonio, but encouraged by Elizabeta’s teasing, Feliciano thought it was acceptable to pretend Lovino had.

“Shall we go then?” Antonio asked. “I’ll love to hear what he said about me.”

This was going to end in a disaster.

As soon as the five of them walked out of the dance school and headed to the closer restaurant, Lovino realized that a disaster would be the nicest thing it could happen to him in that moment. Anything was welcome: a meteor, a flood, an earthquake, an alien invasion, whatever was needed to make the world stop turning.

Elizabeta and Roderich avoided talking to each other for the most part of the evening, leaving Feliciano fill the silence for them. It was not like Feliciano was the type of guy who could fail to find something to say, anyway, and Antonio turned out to be the talker himself.

Watching them interact was like being on the backstage of a gossip talk show. It was embarrassing, to say the least.

It was only natural that Antonio and Feliciano sat down next to each other when they found an empty table to seat. Sensing how noisy the two could be, the waiter showed them to the loneliest table in the whole restaurant, the one no one wanted, just next to the toilette.

Roderich would usually complain about the seating arrangement, but he too was too focused on Feliciano's college adventures to care about the smell.

Lovino didn't care about the smell either.

Not when Feliciano was all over Antonio, grabbing his arm once every ten minutes to make sure he had the older man's undivided attention. Which he had. Unfortunately.

The sight was revolting. Feliciano was leaning too close to Antonio for comfort and the fucker was doing nothing to put some personal space between them. Elizabeta stared at them with a loving expression on her face, and only Roderich had decency enough to keep his eyes on his plate.

Lovino had no idea what the food tasted like.

Like piss, maybe.

“-and then he went and put ketchup on it! Ketchup! Can you believe him?” Feliciano exclaimed.

Flaring his nostrils, Lovino closed his eyes and took a deep breath. That same stupid story again. They were kids at the time and their dad decided to celebrate Feliciano's birthday by taking them to a restaurant. The young Vargas whined so much about the lack of sauce in his pasta that the waiter got so fed up with him, he squeezed ketchup on it to make the kid shut up. It wasn't even a funny story. Feliciano always forgot to mention the really funny part, where he fainted because he thought the ketchup bottle was bleeding.

No one should be able to laugh to this story omitting the last part. It was just fucking stupid and-!

Antonio laughed.

Lovino glared at him. Antonio wasn't paying him any attention; he brushed shoulders with Feliciano again, who was gesturing wildly at the empty plate in front of him. Lovino's eyes dropped on his food; he was not hungry at all. Pushing it away from him, he wondered if he should excuse himself from the table and try to escape through the small windows in the bathroom stall.

Antonio seemed so focused on whatever Feliciano was telling him now to notice, anyway.

The fucker was openly smiling. Hands finding Feliciano's shoulders, legs probably brushing under the table, green eyes twinkling with amusement and— fuck.

“You have tomato sauce on your lips,” Antonio said.

“Where?” Feliciano asked.

“He's always so messy,” Elizabeta teased and beamed when Antonio just wiped the offending stain from Feliciano's lower lip with a clean handkerchief.

What the fuck.

No, he couldn't stand this.

Feliciano was his younger brother. Plus, he had a boyfriend –a shitty one, but a boyfriend still and-!

"I think it's getting late," Lovino said pushing himself away from the table. "I'm going home."

Antonio and Feliciano looked up at him, finally shutting up. Roderich arched an eyebrow in question, but nothing compared to the devastated look Elizabeta threw his way. Lovino bit his lip and grabbed his coat hanging from the back of his chair. The waiter across the room eyed him suspiciously, and Lovino reached for his wallet and slammed some bucks on the table.

"Have fun," he muttered.

"Wait, Lovino!" Elizabeta exclaimed. "We can leave together!"

"No, no, I'm..." Lovino hesitated, "...you still have dessert. I need to go back."

"Lovino," Feliciano said, looking as if Lovino had just slapped him across the face. The expression on his brother's face made him sick, and Lovino shot a glance to Antonio's arm still hanging on the back of Feliciano's chair before he stormed out of the restaurant.

As soon as the fresh evening air caressed his face, Lovino felt a weight being lifted from his chest. He started walking to the closest bus stop, not sure he had enough money in his pocket to go back.

The only thing he was sure of was that he was going to barricade in his room for the rest of the evening. Blaring music was all he needed to get the picture of Antonio flirting with Feliciano out of his head.

Because that was what had just happened, right? Feliciano and Antonio were clearly all over each other.

The fucker.

Bastard.

Who did he think he was, anyway? Lovino knew he was a bastard from the get go and--!

"Wait, Lovino!"

Antonio was the last person Lovino wanted to see right now.

"What the hell!" Lovino shouted to nothing in particular. He turned violently around to face Antonio head on, not without shooting a look over the other's shoulder to make sure no one else was following him.

“Are you mad?” Antonio asked, taking a step closer to him.

“Of course I’m fucking pissed, bastard!” Lovino exclaimed poking Antonio’s chest with his finger. “What was that all about?”

“What?” Antonio asked, jumping back in surprise. Lovino groaned.

“We are not exclusive, but fuck! That was completely messed up!” Lovino exclaimed. “You were clearly hitting on my brother, for fuck’s sake!”

“I was not,” Antonio said and Lovino’s eyes widened up in anger.

“Do you think I’m stupid or something?” Lovino asked, “You called him cute at least five times, you were brushing hands and you even had your arm over his chair!”

“I did not,” Antonio said hesitantly, “did I?”

Lovino groaned and crossed his arms over his chest. “Do you have a kink or something?” Lovino asked. “You wanna fuck him too or what? I won’t let you, just so you know. You can’t do that to him.”

“I don’t want to do anything with him.”

“I knew you were messed up in the mind,” Lovino said rubbing his fingers against his temples. He swirled around and kept walking, hoping Antonio would get his clue and leave him finally alone.

“I don’t see what the problem is,” Antonio shouted after him, making him stop again. “There’s no harm in calling someone cute if they are, right? Are you jealous?”

“I’m not jealous!” Lovino exclaimed, turning to him again. Antonio grinned, and Lovino felt his face burn. “I am fucking not, damnit!”

“You’re gorgeous, Lovi,” Antonio said. “Although, I must say, Feliciano is way more docile than you--”

“I’ll just stop you right there,” Lovino said, raising his hand. “Fine. You wanna try your luck with him? Just go. See if I care.”

“You did say we are not exclusive,” Antonio said, making Lovino stop in mid-track.

“I did,” Lovino admitted after a moment of silence. “But...”

“But what?” Antonio prodded. “If it’s not a big deal to you, you shouldn’t mind if your brother was hitting on me,” he said. “Although I don’t see how he was... I mean, he was just being nice and--”

“That was not being nice,” Lovino blurted. “And anyway, no, I don’t mind. Damn it.”

“Then?”

Lovino glared at him and slid his hands in his pockets, hating the fact he didn't know what to say.

"You can do what you want," Lovino mumbled. "Sleep with whomever. We just messed around a couple of times, not a big deal."

"What if I don't want to?"

"To what?" Lovino asked, although it came out more as a statement than a true question.

"Sleep with whomever," Antonio replied, "I'm not that kind of guy, just so you know."

"Me neither," Lovino rushed to say.

"So?"

"So, so," Lovino angrily retorted, "what do you want me to say? I just couldn't stand seeing your hands all over Feliciano. He's my brother, for fuck's sake, and he has a shitty boyfriend, so--"

"You're jealous," Antonio said in a sing song voice, earning another fiery glare from Lovino's part.

"You're a moron," Lovino spat.

Antonio smiled at him, and Lovino fought against the urge to smile back. There were so many things they needed to clarify before they could move on, but neither of them wanted to speak those things aloud yet. Lovino didn't have the courage to, and Antonio was probably unaware they needed to talk.

"Let's go back to the restaurant?" Antonio asked.

"Yes," Lovino said. It was difficult to resist those bright green eyes.

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

“So what was that all about?”

The question lingered in mid-air, curious and accusing at the same time. Lovino just stood there, closed the door behind him and wondered if he should ask his brother again. Maybe he hadn't heard him. Feliciano surely was taking his sweet time taking his coat off, not even dignifying Lovino with a glance when his brother started tapping his feet against the tiled floor in annoyance. As if deep in thought, Feliciano just raised his eyes from his keys and knitted his eyebrows at Lovino in puzzlement.

“What?” Feliciano asked, kicking his ankles in a strange attempt at getting his shoes off as soon as physically possible.

Then silence. Lovino thought he made himself clear enough already. The clock ticking the minutes by in the kitchen was the only sound they heard for a while until Lovino broke the silence with an irritated huff.

“You were obviously flirting with Antonio,” Lovino accused him. If Feliciano was going to pretend to be deaf, then Lovino could do nothing but get this over with by being painfully direct. Painful for him, at least; Feliciano had no idea how much it bothered Lovino to picture Antonio and his brother all touchy-feely together. Now that the two of them were back in their shared apartment, nothing was going to stop Lovino from strangling his brother if he as much dared to say the wrong thing.

“I wasn't,” Feliciano defended himself. “Is that why you run off? Did you read too much into whatever you think you saw like you always do?”

Feliciano's eyes searched Lovino's face with honest curiosity, and Lovino felt the blush crawling up the back of his neck under that inquiring stare.

“I do not read too much into anything,” Lovino snapped, because he did not, damn it. He knew what he saw and Feliciano was just messing with him.

Or not?

“I wasn't,” Feliciano repeats. “Antonio had eyes only for you, if you want to know. It was kind of sweet, actually.”

Breathe catching, Lovino raised his hand to rub the back of his neck in embarrassment and started mumbling, “H-he didn't... what the hell, Feli. H-he... oh, do shut up.”

For a fleeting second, a look of understanding crossed his brother's face, so fast Lovino thought he had imagined it at first. He needed to change subject before Feliciano could bombard him with questions and what better way to mask his discomfiture with anger?

“Oh, fuck that,” Lovino snapped. “I’m not going to pretend you weren’t acting weird tonight.”

The stare down that followed would have surely looked embarrassing to an outsider. Their personalities couldn’t be more different, completely opposite, in fact, but they were still brothers, and neither of them wanted to back down first. Overreacting was something Lovino did; Feliciano was good at bottling all his feelings inside and pretend everything was okay even when it was not. That was why it was difficult to understand what either of them was thinking: what they said not always coincided with their real feelings. In regards to his brother, however, Lovino had learned to read between the lines long ago, and Feliciano always had trouble hiding anything away from him.

Indeed, just a few moments later, Feliciano’s shoulders slumped in defeat and his knowing smile melted into a grimace, as if Lovino had just reminded him something he had been trying to erase from his memory all day long.

“I was having a good time, that’s all,” Feliciano said, shrugging his shoulders in a nonchalant manner.

“Yes, I could see that,” Lovino retorted, not missing a beat.

“You would have too if you had stopped being so upset,” Feliciano said.

“I didn’t even want to come in the first place.”

Feliciano humph-ed.

“Well?” Lovino prodded. “Are we seriously going to do this right now?”

“Do what?”

“*This?*”

Feliciano opened his mouth and nodded his head absentmindedly. Eyes glazed over in deep thought, Feliciano started fiddling with his fingers. A shiver ran up Lovino’s spine, the realization something was *indeed* wrong overwhelmed him with guilt. He cursed himself for being an ass and took an imperceptible step towards his brother, who raised his scared chestnut eyes to him in surprise.

“What’s wrong?” Lovino asked.

“Nothing.”

Yes, right. You are going to burst out crying in like five. Four.

Lovino asked, balling his hands into fists, “You want me to apologize? For thinking that you were-”

Three.

“No. Why would I?”

Two.

“Spit it out, goddamnit.”

One.

“I broke up with Ludwig, okay?” Feliciano cried taking Lovino totally off guard. Eyes wide as saucers, Feliciano’s expression would be hilarious if it weren’t for what just came out of his mouth. “You were right, okay,” Feliciano continued, rubbing a hand over his eyes. “You were right. We are not meant for each other. It was fun while it lasted but it’s over now, so you can stop sleeping with a knife under your pillow.”

Lovino was struck speechless. Feliciano let out a shaky breath, his red rimmed eyes the only sign he desperately wanted to cry but didn’t know if he should.

“Ludwig and I broke up,” Feliciano repeated, his voice breaking in mid-sentence.

“What did he do?” Lovino asked, narrowing his gaze at his brother. He felt the sudden urge to hunt his CEO down with a machete, but Feliciano’s bitter snort was all Lovino needed to throw that thought right into the trash. Ludwig was going to get the upper hand, anyway.

“He proposed to me,” Feliciano announced.

Someone must have dropped a bucket of icy cold water over his head, because there was no way Lovino could feel that cold all of a sudden. Rubbing his ear in utter astonishment, Lovino couldn’t believe what he just heard.

“He did what?” Lovino exclaimed. Feliciano shook his head and made to walk past Lovino and towards the stairs to the upper floor. Lovino caught his arm before he could disappear into his room, holding Feliciano’s heated glare with one of his own.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay, he proposed and then what?” Lovino asked, ignoring Feliciano’s outburst. The anger was gone from his brother’s eyes in an instant. He was less likely than Lovino to address his problems with rage, but it was still unusual for him not to cry about it yet.

“It’s *obvious* you want to talk about it! You wouldn’t have come to tango class if you didn’t! Spit it out! What happened?”

Maybe prodding wasn’t the right way to go, but Lovino knew how to push Feliciano’s buttons.

“I turned him down,” Feliciano admitted, his voice lower than a whisper.

“I thought you were head over heels for the bastard,” Lovino stated, confusion written all over his face. It was impossible that Feliciano couldn’t see it, but he still shrugged him off as it weren’t that important. Liar.

“I don’t know,” Feliciano said, shaking his head helplessly. “I didn’t-! You know what, Lovino, if you want to gloat just do it already. We broke up, just like you wanted and-!”

“I never said that,” Lovino cut him off, letting him finally go. “I don’t like him, but, whatever.”

Feliciano averted his gaze and Lovino thanked all the Gods that Feliciano wasn’t going to comment on the obvious blush on his cheeks. Damn his mouth. Maybe if he just told Feliciano that this is what he had always dreamed of, he would feel better about it and talk. The fact was, however, that Lovino honestly didn’t give a fuck about Ludwig. As long as Feliciano didn’t throw himself in Antonio’s embrace to get over his heartbreak, Lovino was really fine with whatever.

That was an awkward thought.

“Was he embarrassing about it?” Lovino willed himself to ask. “Is that it?”

“No. Yes.” Feliciano scoffed, “I don’t know.” Feliciano hesitated for a moment, and Lovino thought his brother was going to clam up and leave, when Feliciano started talking again, as fast as a machine gun. “I just pictured us together and I panicked. He loves me more than I love him, but he doesn’t think as high of me as I do of him. You know what I mean? How can that even work? It might come as a surprise to you but we fought a lot and he wins every time, even when I am in the right. This is not something I want to experience forever. He’s a great guy, I should be happy, but I’m not. I don’t feel free with him. Honestly? He chose the wrong moment to propose to me and I just-!”

“How did he take it?” Lovino asked.

“Too calmly for my taste,” Feliciano said. “I would have much preferred it if he had been a big meanie about it, so now I wouldn’t feel guilty for turning him down.”

Lovino blinked at him, unsure of what to say, and Feliciano took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down and failing.

“You s-shouldn’t...” Lovino muttered. He had no idea how to deal with this situation.

So he had read this completely wrong. Antonio was safe from Feliciano’s grasp, Ludwig was out of the way forever and Gilbert was going to stop calling him his brother-in-law once and for all. All in all, it was a win-win situation for him, and yet he couldn’t help but feeling guilty for not being able to cheer his brother up as he knew he should. If the lack of tears on Feliciano’s face was anything to go by, his brother honestly panicked and turned Ludwig down in the heat of the moment. He has not yet grasped the seriousness of what had just happened to him. Or maybe he hadn’t loved Ludwig for real. If that’s the case, what do you say to someone who has just realized he was dating someone he didn’t actually love?

“You shouldn’t feel guilty,” Lovino tried again. “You did what you felt was the right thing to do.”

“Yeah,” Feliciano breathed, casting his eyes down.

“I mean, you didn’t love him and-”

“It’s not that simple,” Feliciano cut him off, “you’ve never fallen in love so I guess you can’t understand. Let it go. I just want to go to bed right now,” he announced and before Lovino could do anything about it, he ran up the stairs and slammed the door to his room behind him.

Lovino had no idea what to do after that. He wondered if he should call Elizabeta and ask her to come over –she would know what to do- but thought better of it. Feliciano needed some time alone.

Like Lovino did.

Everything was changing, but he had no idea if it was a good or a bad thing.

His obsession over Antonio was definitely a bad thing, though. Running away from the restaurant because he couldn’t deal with the thought Antonio might prefer his brother over him was a bad omen in itself, but nothing could beat the fact he willingly followed Antonio back to their friends.

Was he getting weaker? Was he coming down with the flu?

Now, after Feliciano confessed that something big had indeed happened to him, Lovino blamed his supposed jealousy and subordination to a telepathic bond he had with his brother. He knew there was something wrong with him, so he had to check. The fact he couldn’t do anything to make his brother feel better was irrelevant.

So let’s focus on what he knew he could do. Which was not a lot, actually.

Lovino was still confused as to why Antonio had followed him exactly. They needed to talk. Of course they did. But how?

The next time Lovino and Antonio met was a couple of hours before his next tango class.

It was Antonio who called him, right when the hand on the clock hanging on the wall opposite from his cubicle declared it was time for him to go home. Gilbert had not gone to bother him for the whole day, Ludwig was absent, and Elizabeta too was in a bad mood and had not talked to him once. All in all, Lovino couldn’t wait to get away from all that negativity. Hanging out with Antonio was going to brighten up those few hours before tango class started.

And it did.

But something was completely different as well.

Laying side by side in Antonio’s bed doing nothing but chitchat was not something Lovino knew how to deal with. They’ve never done that before and it sure was a huge step forwards in their otherwise purely sexual relationship. Lovino was happy that neither of Antonio’s roommates were around to mock him for it. It was nice to have the whole apartment just for the two of them.

Moreover, Antonio was in the mood to talk. Lovino would never admit, not even under torture, how much he liked his voice.

“This is Isabela,” Antonio said showing him a picture of a girl Lovino remembered to have seen somewhere before. Lovino carefully took it in his hands and examined the soft features of a brunette smiling to him. She was beautiful, nose straight and regal like the queens of old. She gave off an aristocratic vibe, actually, like someone who couldn’t take no for an answer and knew how to get what she wanted. That was why Lovino was surprised when Antonio continued:

“She’s my queen.”

“You married?”

Blushing madly when Antonio burst out laughing, Lovino shoved the picture back in the other’s hands.

“No,” he said when the laughter subsided. “She is my friend, a sister almost, but she bossed me around since she was a baby, so I started calling her my queen and then nickname just stuck.”

“Aha...” Lovino didn’t know what to do with that piece of information.

“She’s very sick right now,” Antonio said raising the photograph to his eye level. A loving gesture. “I wished I could have stayed by her side, but I wanted to move out from my small hometown and try my luck somewhere much more exciting. As soon as she feels better, though, I’ll ask her to move in here with me.”

Lovino remained completely silent. The whole conversation reminded him of Feliciano, how he was stuck with him until he graduated. Truth be told, Lovino couldn’t wait for Feliciano to move out and leave him the apartment, but he would be lying if he said it wouldn’t feel lonely without him. Sometimes he truly believed that he depended on Feliciano more than his brother did on him, and he wondered if it was true for Antonio too.

Dependency. Lovino feared that word with a passion.

Antonio was not the kind of guy who kneeled. Isabela was just an exception. Lovino wished he could be like him.

He had depended on his dad when he was a kid. Now, he realized, he depended on his brother too. He had dreaded for the moment Feliciano left with Ludwig and was happy that was over and done with. What a selfish man.

Not like Antonio.

He had a big heart, which he was now showing Lovino without inhibition.

Suddenly, something Elizabeta told him long ago came to mind.

He's still in the foolish phase, you know? The one where you don't have any responsibilities, where you are not really working on your differences and all you think of is being with each other. Love is all you need and that shit.

For Feliciano that phase was over.

Lovino wondered if he was going to go through the same painful breakup too, until he realized that Antonio and him were not really dating. Looking up at him, Lovino convinced himself he didn't love him. They were just fooling around, that's all. They were never going to work on their differences because they were not planning of living this together. Antonio had his life –Isabela, tango, his friends; Lovino had his –his brother, his work and nothing more.

And yet.

What would it be like to be with Antonio for real? Would Antonio look at him like he did Isabela?

“What's up?” Antonio asked, suddenly noticing the way Lovino was gazing at him.

“Nothing,” Lovino rushed to say. “I just thought I need a shower and my shirt stinks. I can't possible dance with Bella like this.”

“I can lend you one of mine if you want,” Antonio said, putting the picture away. “You know where the bathroom is. Francis won't mind if you use his soap and shampoo.”

“And smell like a damn gay flower?” Lovino asked, standing up. “No, thank you.”

Antonio laughed, and Lovino's heart beat faster in his chest. *Ah. This is not good*, he thought. Antonio telling him things about himself was not good. He was going to get used to him. Lovino didn't want to know him well. This was not supposed to be a thing.

What if he made Feliciano's same mistake?

Casting his eyes down, Lovino left Antonio alone and hid in the shower for almost an hour. When he came back, Antonio was fumbling in the kitchen preparing something to eat before they left for tango class. Butterflies threw a ball inside his stomach when he slid Antonio's shirt on him. It was a little too wide on the shoulders, but it smelled nice, much better than his sweaty button down shirt.

“Hey, Lovi!” Antonio exclaimed taking some toast out of the toaster and waving his hands in the air when he burnt himself. “I had a wonderful idea, hear me out.”

“What is it?” Lovino asked, pouring some orange juice in a glass.

“There is going to be a tango competition for beginners in four months,” Antonio said. “I think it would be a great idea if you and your friends participated! It's nothing fancy but it's going to be an awesome experience. What do you say?”

“No.”

“Aw, Lovi, why not?”

“Because I’m not a fucking good dancer and-! God! I can’t make a fool of myself in front of so many people!”

“Everybody is going to be a newbie,” Antonio said. “It’s not a real competition and it’s going to be fun. I’m going to be there too and I’ll cheer for you real loud.”

“What a moron,” Lovino mumbled and shook his head. “No, no it’s embarrassing.”

“I am going to tell the class today!” Antonio said, ignoring his protest.

Lovino’s lips shouldn’t be quirking upwards in a smile at Antonio’s enthusiasm. He shouldn’t be there, in a stranger’s house, taking a shower and accepting food as if he owned the place. He shouldn’t be thinking of asking Antonio more about Isabela and how his life had been before they met.

“I’m not taking part of this,” Lovino said.

“Bella would be so disappointed in you,” Antonio reproached him. “I can’t dance with her. This is not for professional dancers.”

“It’s expensive.”

“I didn’t even talk about money yet!”

“I just don’t want to.”

“Let’s talk with the class first,” Antonio said, as if Lovino was not a student but a coworker, another teacher working for the same dance school. Equals.

Lovino fell silent. He nibbled on his toast and asked for cheese just to have something to occupy his mouth with. Antonio gulped down a cup of cold coffee he swore was his and put all the dirty dishes into the sink. Lovino watched him as he paced around the kitchen, followed him into the living room when Antonio remembered he was supposed to go to work in less than half an hour and he was still shirtless.

“Should I leave first?” Lovino asked, when the thought that it might look suspicious if Antonio and he walked in class together occurred him. Antonio arched an eyebrow in question, totally taken aback.

“Why? We are heading the same way.”

“Yes, well.”

Antonio stared at him, a tender look crossing his face when Lovino parted his lips, searching for something else to say, anything that could justify his decision. Nothing sounded right in his head, so Lovino closed his mouth shut again.

What was the point anyway? Going to class together or with a ten minutes difference between them was not going to erase the couple of hours they spent together. That it's something they both knew and no one else was aware of, so why bother. Lovino's classmates were just going to shrug their shoulders and start dancing, so it was stupid to think that being seen arriving together implied there was something serious going on between the two.

And it was not serious, goddammit.

So why did it felt like something was changing? Lovino surely didn't want to get used to Antonio opening his heart to him and vice versa. This was something people in a serious relationship did, right? Or friends. Or brothers.

Maybe they just reached the friendship stage, and that was all there was to it.

One thing was certain: he wasn't going to miscalculate everything like Feliciano had, let alone depress himself over an unhappy marriage like Elizabeta did. Commitment was not a Vargas thing, it seemed. But what if one of the two decided to turn everything around?

He said it last time: they were not exclusive.

So, no, Lovino had nothing to be afraid of. They were friends. Two people who had no idea who the other really was but that have already seen each other naked.

"I'm going to be ready in a few," Antonio said, jolting him out of his thoughts. Lovino hummed in response and sat down on the couch to wait for him.

They were playing a very dangerous game. It was fun but it was going to hurt like a bitch if feelings got somehow involved. Not that Lovino thought he was ever going to feel something other than irritation for the guy. Happy-go-lucky was not his type. But what if Antonio did care and started spouting nonsense like Ludwig had done? What was he supposed to do? Turn him down? Yes, well, that made sense, right?

"Shall we go?" Antonio asked, walking back into the living room. Lovino shot up from the couch and grabbed his things before they left the apartment to tango class.

As Lovino expected, no one raised an eyebrow when the two walked into the ballroom together.

Overthinking, much?

"So I heard I am not supposed to call you my brother-in-law anymore," Gilbert sighed, making an exaggerated painful expression with his face. Lovino turned around in his office chair and scoffed.

"Where were you yesterday?"

"Missed me?" Gilbert teased and leaned against the wall, a lecherous smirk stretching on his lips.

“I guess Satan just got tired of listening to your rants,” Lovino said and focused his attention back on the paperwork at hand. He heard Gilbert click his tongue besides him followed by the sound of a squeaking chair.

“Did your brother say anything?” Gilbert asked, lowering his voice. Pushing the paperwork away, Lovino scratched his nose deep in thought.

“Nothing I didn’t know already.”

“Ludwig says it’s fine,” Gilbert told him, “but I can see he’s utterly embarrassed about what has happened.”

“Oh, let him be,” Lovino said. “He must understand that a Beilschmidt is not worth five Vargases.”

“Are you trying to tell me you wouldn’t marry me? I am worth five times more than Ludwig,” Gilbert said, chuckling. A roll of the eyes was all Gilbert got in response, so the albino felt free to continue, “I would propose to you if I were available.”

“What?” Lovino exclaimed, snapping his head towards him. Gilbert studied his nails with a satisfied smirk. “What the hell happened?”

“Nothing,” Gilbert drawled, his tone of voice, however, betrayed his lie. Before Lovino could ask, someone gently knocked on the wall behind them and they both turned around towards Elizabeta, whose eyes flickered between the two of them in wonder.

“You have to check these out,” she said walking to Lovino’s desk in two strides and putting down some files before Lovino’s nose. With the corner of his eye, Lovino noticed the way Gilbert’s face suddenly softened.

“Okay, thanks,” Lovino said, wary, and narrowed his gaze at Elizabeta, who arched an eyebrow as if daring him to ask her anything that was not directly related to work.

“Good,” Elizabeta said, smiling widely at him, and wordlessly left them alone again.

“You *didn’t*,” Lovino hissed turning back to Gilbert when he couldn’t hear her high heels anymore. Gilbert smirked.

“She said she was going to go out with me,” Gilbert boasted. “She promised me one date!”

“One date doesn’t mean anything,” Lovino reasoned.

“What do you know,” Gilbert muttered, pouting like the overgrown kid he was. Lovino’s scrunched his nose in disgust and flipped through the files to organize his thoughts.

“You shouldn’t take up on that offer,” Lovino said. “She’s still married.”

“Exactly,” Gilbert said smoothly with a knowing, catlike smile. “Still. But not for long, you’ll see!”

“As if she’s going to divorce for your sake,” Lovino said, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. “This is wrong, Gilbert. Just go and say no to her already.”

“Yeah, right,” Gilbert said leaning closer to him, “look who’s talking.”

“What?” Lovino cried, his heart speeding up under Gilbert’s knowing look.

“I bought that T-shirt for Antonio’s birthday,” Gilbert said, checking him from head to toe. Lovino's face flushed a bright red and he stuffed his nose into Elizabeta’s file to hide his embarrassment.

“It’s mine.”

“No, it’s not,” Gilbert said and pointed at a faint smudge on the T-shirt right sleeve. “See that? It’s my fault, I was--”

“Oh, fuck you!” Lovino exclaimed. “What do you want me to say?”

“How long have you two been dating?” Gilbert prodded, leaning so close to him that their noses almost bumped together.

“We are not dating.”

“Right.”

Lovino bit his lip. “We are not.”

Gilbert studied his face long and hard, before a surprised ‘oh’ sound escaped his throat. Focusing on his files, Lovino hoped Gilbert would get a clue, stop wasting his time, and leave him to work in peace.

“Is that alright by you?” Gilbert asked, and Lovino jumped back in surprise at the faint worry seeping through Gilbert’s words.

“What do you mean?” Lovino asked, regretting his question immediately after. It took Gilbert a while to find the right words to say, but when he did, Lovino wished he had stayed silent.

“One of the things Elizabeta likes to talk about a lot is your tango classes,” Gilbert said. “And she might have mentioned how obviously attracted you are to my dear friend. So...”

“I am not.”

“Lovino, if you feel something for him, you shouldn’t do that to yourself,” Gilbert said, staring him right in the eyes. “Antonio is loyal only to himself.”

Throat dry, Lovino looked down at his paperwork and forced himself to laugh.

“Are you fucking worried about me? It’s fine, damn it,” Lovino said. “I am not in love or whatever, relax. It was a spur of the moment thing. Nothing serious.”

“If you say so,” Gilbert said standing up. Lovino purposely didn’t look up from his paperwork as Gilbert gave his shoulder a light squeeze and walked away.

Here’s another confirmation that Lovino had no idea of who Antonio was. He should feel relieved that his fears of Antonio asking him out one day were in fact unfounded, but he did not.

Strangely enough a stab to the heart would have hurt way less.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Please give a round of applause to my lovely beta TheCrystalFalls for sticking up for me and for being such a sweetheart.

Chapter Eight

As expected, Bella and Elizabeta were immediately on board with Antonio's crazy idea and literally jumped at the opportunity to join a real tango competition. The fact that it was aimed at professional dancers, and thus not an event a person in their right mind should take seriously, was beside the point. To them, Lovino's disagreement confirmed just how much of a spoilsport he really was. Frankly, Lovino was nothing but a-

“-man who rejoices in his friends' misery and ruins everybody's fun because he's got none,” Elizabeta said, batting her eyelashes at him in mock sweetness. It took all Lovino's willpower to not flip her off.

On their part, it took the two girls only a few minutes to talk Katyusha into it and then another five to persuade a very flustered and insecure Matthew to finally give in to peer pressure. His argument that they've barely started learning tango met four pairs of deaf ears.

Last but not least, Roderich stated his opinion on the matter by saying... absolutely nothing.

His silent approval aroused Lovino's suspicion but he shrugged it off immediately after, aware that Elizabeta could be pretty convincing when she wanted. It wasn't until their next tango class that he grasped the seriousness of the situation.

The alarm bells went off only when he walked into the ballroom and realized that Roderich was nowhere to be seen. In his place, bickering with Elizabeta as if they've known each other since Cleopatra's rise in power, was no other but Gilbert Beilschmidt himself.

Lovino had to rub his eyes and pinch himself twice to finally accept the fact he was not dreaming this. Unaware of the big question mark popping right above Lovino's head, Gilbert waved at him and flashed him the thumbs-up.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Lovino hissed through his teeth and walked to him in two strides. His shoes squeaked against the wooden floor, attracting everybody's attention to them. Antonio too lazily raised his eyes from the CD player he was fiddling with in order to watch them closely.

“Hey, Lovi!” Gilbert greeted, smirking like the cat that got the milk. “We are going to be tango buddies, aren’t you excited?”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Lovino asked and sensing Gilbert’s ludicrous reply, he turned his bewildered eyes to Elizabeta for answers. The girl, however, just scratched the back of her head in a nonchalant manner.

“Well, I needed a partner,” Elizabeta said after a long moment of awkward silence, when Lovino showed no intention to drop the matter right then and there.

“Where’s Roderich?” Katyusha asked.

“He quit,” Gilbert replied in Elizabeta’s place. The brown haired girl shot him an irritated glance but otherwise kept quiet.

“Why?” Lovino prodded and narrowed his gaze at Gilbert. “What did you do?”

“Roderich couldn’t balance classes and tango, that’s all,” Elizabeta said. “Do you mind?” she asked, arching her eyebrow.

Lovino bit the inside of his lip before he could blurt out something that might backfire. He couldn’t believe Elizabeta asked Gilbert –of all people!- to take Roderich’s place. Whatever their issues were, has she really skipped so low to throw herself in the arms of her fucking boss? How cliché. This was not like Elizabeta at all.

“He’s just jealous I won’t dance with him,” Gilbert said, making everything worse as always. His statement caused a few raised eyebrows, but Lovino was more concerned with Antonio’s vexed expression briefly flashing across the other’s face, accompanied by a feeble twitch of the lips.

Lovino drew back, away from Gilbert, and crossed his arms across his chest, when Elizabeta heaved an irritated sigh.

“Should we start?” Antonio asked, finally pressing the play button and turning to them with a big, oblivious grin.

No, Lovino didn’t want to start yet. He felt the need to tell Elizabeta what a big mistake she was making, trying to replace Roderich with Gilbert. It would only lead to trouble and a couple of broken hearts. He couldn’t stand seeing either of them hurt because of something so silly.

Shoving those thoughts in the back of his mind, Lovino whipped around and took Bella’s arm in his, unceremoniously dragging her back to their usual spot next to the big mirror.

“Remember what I taught you at home,” Antonio said, directed at Gilbert, who nodded enthusiastically at him. “Let’s warm up a little bit before I talk to you about the choreographies I come up with for...”

“Lovino,” Bella whispered, freeing herself from Lovino’s hold and snapping her fingers in front of her face to gain his attention, “what’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” Lovino said. Behind them, Antonio directed their steps with his loud, cheerful voice, and Lovino’s already foul mood worsened. He stopped listening and let Bella lead the warm up exercises.

“You don’t like the new guy?” Bella asked, curious. Lovino thought about his answer for a while before he finally shook his head no, the frustrated expression melting down in something less forbidding.

“He’s my boss,” Lovino explained. “He’s not supposed to be here, but whatever, I guess. He’s an idiot.”

“So?”

“Nothing,” Lovino repeated. “Long day at work.”

Mouth crooked in a skeptical smile, Bella made it obvious that she didn’t quite believe him. Lovino, however, preferred to bear her look of disapproval rather than to defend himself, since he couldn’t quite explain why he was suddenly in such a bad mood himself. At first he blamed Gilbert for it, but the truth was he had been under the weather since he walked into the ballroom and saw Antonio’s face.

Gilbert told him that Antonio was just loyal to his own self. The statement bothered Lovino greatly, although there was no reason why he should give weight to what the albino thought it was true. He saw the way Antonio gazed at Isabela’s picture, and if that hadn’t been something akin to loyalty then Lovino had no idea what this word really meant.

Maybe what Gilbert really wanted to tell him was that Antonio was devoted to some people and easily disregarded others. Isabela obviously belonged to the first category, and Lovino probably wasn’t important enough to fit in either. Lovino couldn’t blame him. In the big scheme of things, they were nothing to each other.

Antonio’s palpable jealousy whenever Gilbert was by Lovino’s side, though, contradicted the above statement. So was there a place for him in Antonio’s heart after all? Lovino had no idea but at the same time he didn’t want to think about it. Antonio’s attitude towards him was confusing, to say the least, and Lovino didn’t know what to do if he somehow managed to get in the other’s head.

Antonio Fernández Carriedo was a mystery, a five thousand piece puzzle not even a genius could solve. Treading into unknown territory was not Lovino’s forte. He preferred running in the opposite direction.

“Be careful!” Bella’s outburst jolted him back in the real world. Lovino still, his right foot hanging in mid-air. Bella breathed out in pain and let go of Lovino’s arms to clutch her aching ankle.

“Sorry,” Lovino muttered.

“It’s all right,” Bella reassured him, gently rubbing a red spot above her heel.

“Sorry.”

“What’s on your mind?” she asked, straightening up and cautiously putting her hands back on Lovino’s shoulders.

“Bella.” Lovino shot a glance over his shoulder and let out a sigh of relief when he noticed Antonio was too occupied with Gilbert’s poor attempt at dancing to notice them. Reverting his attention back to his partner, Lovino willed himself to continue: “I think I’m sick.”

Eyebrow arched high, Bella pushed a strand of hair from Lovino’s forehead and felt his temperature.

“You seem fine to me,” she said.

“N-no,” Lovino stuttered, “I might not be right in the mind. You know what I mean?”

“I don’t follow you,” Bella said furrowing her eyebrow in question. She followed his gaze as he glanced back towards Antonio and tilted her head to the side.

“I-I have a friend,” Lovino began, making up his mind.

“Yes.”

“This friend... okay, he’s my brother, you follow me?”

“Quite.”

“He has this other friend...”

“Huh.”

“Don’t look so- so! He... I’m getting to it.” Lovino scratched his head. “He has this other friend, who means nothing to him. At all. They don’t even know each other that well.”

“Right,” Bella said, confusion written all over her face, “and how come they’re friends then?”

“It’s not important,” Lovino rolled his eyes, “they just are. But they have a good time together-- a really good time....” Bella snorted. “Okay, yes.” Lovino coughed in embarrassment. “But this guy seems okay with that, and my brother should too, right? They are having a good time, no problem, they don’t even need to fight over every little silly thing like other couples do. They are not a couple, mind you. They just... stop laughing, Bella, this is serious.”

“I’m not laughing,” Bella said, although her big grin told differently. “Please, go on.”

“But my brother is starting to wonder if they should, you know, try to fight over every little silly thing, go out to dinner together, or, or...”

“Do what couples do,” Bella finished for him.

“Exactly. And this is where I think I am finally losing my mind. I’m starting to... to agree with him. With my brother. And... to be honest, I don’t know if I want to do it at all. It’s just an idea. But then again why should I? Things are okay like this and he never showed signs of--And then Gilbert said--But he--”

“I have no idea if you are talking about your brother anymore,” Bella teased him. Under her knowing stare, Lovino shut his mouth and felt the blush crawl up the back of his neck.

“Shut up,” Lovino snapped. “You asked what was going on in my mind and I’m trying to explain it to you. You don’t need to act so... so... oh, do shut up.”

A bubble of laughter escaped Bella’s throat, and she slammed a hand over her mouth when Lovino narrowed his gaze at her.

“I’m not laughing, seriously!” Bella exclaimed and pulled Lovino closer to her body, hiding her face in the crook of his neck to avoid looking at him in the eye.

Lovino scoffed but his heartbeat slowed down considerably as he put his arms around Bella’s waist again. They danced in silence for a couple of moments, and finally Bella’s laughter subsided into a relieved sigh.

“I think your brother is having mixed feeling over this guy,” Bella said. Lovino concentrated on his feet and didn’t look up until she spoke again. “He probably has a crush on him and--”

“*Nope.*” His loud disagreement bounced off the walls and momentarily muffled the soft music coming from the old CD player.

“Is everything alright?” Antonio asked taking a tentative step towards them. Lovino’s right hand shot up in the air to keep him from coming any closer. Gilbert snickered behind his hand, earning an elbow in the ribs from Elizabeta’s part.

“Just peachy!” Lovino exclaimed. He was trying so hard to conceal his embarrassment than he didn’t notice the hurt flashing in Antonio’s green eyes. It was a blink and you’ll miss it moment and a chill ran through the class before Antonio turned to them and clapped his hands twice to get everybody’s attention.

“Good,” Antonio said. “Enough with warm up. Maybe it’s time I talk to you about the tango competition.”

He turned to Matthew and Katyusha first, and Bella felt free to resume the conversation from where she left it.

“Your brother is going through a lot of trouble,” she said, tone soft. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, Lovino. Relationships are always hard to define at first.”

Lovino hummed and looked away when he said: “But my brother.”

“Lovino,” Bella sighed his name, “I know it’s difficult, but you shouldn’t act so cold towards Antonio in order to organize your thoughts about him. He has no clue what you are going through.”

“I’m not--!”

“Please,” Bella cut in and rolled her eyes knowingly, “Just tell him.”

“Tell him what?” Lovino asked, tearing his eyes away from Antonio’s slender figure.

“That you want something more,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

“But I don’t want something more.”

“That’s what your mind is telling you,” Bella said, a motherly smile stretching across her lips. “But I have a feeling your heart begs to differ.”

Lovino opened his mouth to contradict her but Bella’s bright grin threw him off guard. She let go of Lovino and took a couple of steps towards Matthew and Katyusha to the middle of the ballroom, where Antonio was explaining them the choreographies for the tango competition. Lovino followed suit, more interested in the way Antonio talked rather than what he was really saying.

Fortunately, Bella was taking mental notes for both of them. Since their experience with tango was so short, Antonio came up with figures easy to remember but that could manage to impress the judges all the same. It was going to be worth the effort, he explained.

“It’s not just going to be a fantastic experience, but it would actually give you the chance to win a five-day luxury trip for two to Fiji.”

Clapping his hands once, Antonio urged them back to their place to start practicing their dance routines. Excited chatter filled the room, and soon enough even Lovino forgot about his problems and animatedly talked about the competition with Bella.

His good mood, however, didn’t last long.

Later in the evening, as Elizabeta, Gilbert and Lovino were making their way to the bus stop, Elizabeta was surprised to see Roderich sitting on the bench, rubbing his hands together in nervousness. The bright light of the lampposts above them cast their shadows on the ground before his feet, and Roderich looked up at them in wonder, recognizing Elizabeta’s joyous laughter from afar.

Gilbert and Lovino were bickering over who was going to win and didn’t realize Elizabeta had stopped in her tracks until Lovino bumped into her. Massaging his achy nose, Lovino tilted his head to the side to see what Elizabeta’s problem was.

“What’s wrong?” Gilbert asked.

Roderich’s eyes immediately drifted to him, and Elizabeta picked up her pace, momentarily forgetting she was supposed to take the bus to go back home.

“Hey!” Gilbert exclaimed, trying to grab her arm, but she was gone before any one of them could stop her. Still sitting on the bench, Roderich leaned against the backrest and let out a sigh of frustration.

“So you’re Gilbert?” he asked, voice calm. Lovino’s eyes flickered between the two and made an imperceptible step backwards, feeling the sudden tension in the air.

“Lovino,” Roderich greeted him, standing up in an elegant way. He was not as tall as Gilbert was, but Lovino found his air of superiority that much more unsettling than Gilbert’s definitely intimidating physical appearance.

“Hi,” Lovino whispered and jolted in surprise when he felt his arm bump against Gilbert’s.

“You are Roderich, I suppose,” Gilbert said warily, and Roderich nodded, a tired shake of the head.

Awkward silence descended upon them.

“I should probably run after her,” Gilbert whispered.

“You do that,” Roderich said.

“No, you won’t,” Lovino complained, the idea of being left alone with Roderich making him uneasy. “You stay right where you are.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to me yet, so I can’t go after her,” Roderich said, as if that made any sense at all. Lovino shook his head.

“She is a grown up,” Lovino retorted. “She can take care of herself.”

“Elizabeta needs to be here for this.”

“Are you going to defend her honor or something?” Gilbert said, smirking sarcastically. “I’m not in the mood to get into a fight with a wuss like you, but if you insist...”

Roderich's glasses flashed.

“I’m not going to dirty my hands with a barbarian like yourself.”

“*Barbarian?*”

“And I don’t want to be anyone’s referee, so if you are going to punch each other in front of me, I’m going to call the cops, goddamnit,” Lovino snapped making both of them whip their heads to him.

Lovino flushed. He shuffled his feet and shoved his hands in his pockets. He knew Roderich was more the kind of guy who expressed his emotions through music rather than with his fists, so he was more worried about Gilbert taking this to another level. Lovino didn’t want to get involved in their dispute and he tried to make himself smaller, hiding his chin in his jacket’s collar.

The seconds dragged by and the tension hung in the air like a hangman’s noose.

Finally, Gilbert broke the tension with a harsh laugh.

“Should we go drink something?” Gilbert asked, taking both completely by surprise. Under Lovino’s disbelieving look, Gilbert shrugged and grinned widely. “I think we all need some good beer.”

“Fine,” Roderich accepted, shocking Lovino to silence. The younger man of the their strange trio opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of the water and didn’t struggle when Gilbert grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away to the closest pub, Roderich on tow.

To say they were the most awkward two hours of Lovino’s life would be a huge understatement.

Sitting in between the two men, Lovino sipped his alcoholic drink, unsure of what to do while Gilbert and Roderich stared each other down at opposite sides of the small table. Gilbert gulped his first beer down and ordered another; Roderich took his time with his, tapping his fingers against the glass as if he were playing the piano.

“So.”

“So.”

Lovino groaned against his hands. “You’re aware this is fucking ridiculous, right?”

The two men leaned against their seats and looked up at the ceiling in a very similar manner, which only made Lovino groan louder. Did they think he was their psychiatrist or something? Jesus Christ.

“He’s right,” Roderich said, making Lovino look up from his glass. “I’m not angry at Elizabeta or you,” he rolled his eyes when Gilbert snorted. “You just barged into our life without knocking the door first, like an animal,” Roderich continued. “But if Elizabeta is fine with that, I’m not going to complain.”

“She is not really divorcing you, is she?” Lovino asked, punching Gilbert on the arm before he could say something stupid. Gilbert moaned in protest, but Lovino ignored him and focused his attention on Roderich instead.

“She is,” the bespectacled man said. “By mutual agreement.”

“Because of me?” Gilbert asked in an astounded whisper.

“I barely know you,” Roderich said, “and I doubt Elizabeta would go to such great lengths for you.”

“I am an awesome guy, I’ll let you know,” Gilbert said, scowling. “Do you know how many ladies left their husbands for me?”

“Zero,” Lovino cut him off, “so do shut up.”

Roderich hid his smirk behind an elegant hand.

“I’m an awesome catch,” Gilbert protested.

Lovino rolled his eyes to the ceiling. He looked at Roderich again, his heart speeding up in his chest at the thought that he might need to lend a shoulder to cry on to Elizabeta's soon to be ex. Roderich, however, didn't look like he was going to throw any jealousy induced tantrum any soon.

"What did you do?" Gilbert asked. "Couldn't satisfy her in bed or something?"

"Will you shut the fuck up?" Lovino snapped, pinching Gilbert's thigh with force. The albino jumped in his seat and glared at Lovino, the insult ready on his tongue, when Roderich cut them both with a flick of his hand.

"Our differences were too big to handle," Roderich said. "That's all there is to it."

"All empires fall, eventually," Gilbert mumbled raising his beer to his lips.

"Please, stop talking," Lovino begged. Roderich shook his head in frustration and stared down at his half full glass.

"Don't think you can take my place," Roderich said.

"Your place stinks," Gilbert said. "I'll make a new one -a better one."

"You drank too much already," Lovino reproached him. "You don't make any sense."

"I did not," Gilbert said, squinting his eyes at his empty glass. "Fuck. I need to pee. Wait," he shot up from his chair and walked away towards the bathroom.

Awkwardly, Lovino looked down at his glass again. He played with the idea of following him to the bathroom just to avoid starting a conversation with Roderich, when the older man caught him off guard with a pained sigh.

"I guess Fernández Carriedo was right," Roderich began. He remained silent for a couple of seconds, as if organizing the speech in his head. Then, finally, he continued: "You do need chemistry to dance with a partner. This is what life is all about, isn't it? Having a relationship is not so different from dancing. You can do it for fun or do it like your life depends on it, but in the end what's more important is, are you happy with your partner? We all should find the one we feel a connection to, that makes dancing worth something."

Weirded out about Roderich's words, Lovino shot another glance towards the bathroom.

"But the moment you do, it can be scary to see how much is at stake."

Roderich's next statement earned Lovino's attention, and the younger man knitted his eyebrows in thought.

"It doesn't matter if it's going to end well or not, does it? Either way you are going to lose *something*, because you have to make compromises, try your best to make this work, which means you might sacrifice things you always thought were extremely important to you. But worse of all, you have to abandon yourself in the arms of a total stranger, trust them to hold you up. If you don't trust them, you can't dance. You are just going to step on each other's

feet. It's a fact that can freeze you to the spot. That is why it takes courage to ask someone to dance with you. Are they going to accept? Is it going to feel good? Who knows. You'll never know until you ask."

"Yes, but," Lovino hesitated, afraid that his words might have somehow interrupt Roderich's line of thought. Looking at him behind thin glasses, Roderich asked him to continue with a nod. "Is it worth it in the end? What if you are the only one who thinks that way?"

"Sometimes it's not worth it at all, Lovino," Roderich said, his lips tugging upwards for a fleeting moment, "but trust me when I say that the what-ifs last a lifetime. That's even worse. Listen, Elizabeta and I were happy. Our marriage worked until it became too big for us, our characters are just too different and incompatible, but if I could turn back time and go to that precise moment when I asked her to dance with me, I would do it again."

Lovino didn't know what to say to that, so he glanced down to his empty glass instead. Embarrassed, Roderich coughed once.

"This is what I wanted to tell her, but she walked away before I could."

Lovino's lips twisted in a wry smile, which soon melted into a more thoughtful one. Somewhere in the back of his mind told him to drop the matter and leave Elizabeta and Roderich handle this by themselves, but at the same time he cared too much for them both to let this go without a final word.

"I-I think she still wants to be friends with you," Lovino dared to say, remembering how hurt Elizabeta looked every time she talked about her marriage. "Give her time, a-and," he hesitated, uneasy in his new role as an advisor. He was suddenly aware it didn't suit him. The last thing someone like him could do was to give relationship advice to a married man.

Suddenly, the chair next to his screeched against the tiled floor, and Lovino looked up in surprise at Gilbert's amused face.

"I think the three of us are going to be really good friends," Gilbert announced. "Elizabeta likes you," he said looking at Roderich under half-lidded eyes, "you're just not her type of husband, that's all."

"Hm," Roderich pushed his glasses farther up his nose with his little finger and crossed his arms over his chest. "She likes you too, actually, but you are not her type either."

"Hah!" Gilbert exclaimed. "Keep telling yourself that. Another beer?" he asked, raising his empty glass.

"Yes, why not," Roderich said, and Lovino slammed his head on the table and remained in that position until the two men finished their next round.

When Lovino returned back home, Feliciano had already had dinner and was watching a quiz show on the TV with a blank expression. He didn't even look up from the couch as Lovino walked in and dropped his jacket on the floor with a loud sigh.

“Antonio called,” Feliciano announced. Lovino almost tripped on his shoes and stared at his brother from the doorway.

“*What?*”

“A couple of minutes ago,” Feliciano said, tilting his head to look at him. “I said you were going to call him back.”

“Why the hell would I want to call him back?” Lovino muttered although he was already making his way towards the cordless phone.

“Aren’t you going to eat first?” Feliciano asked.

“Not hungry,” Lovino mumbled. Feeling Feliciano’s questioning look boring into his back, he said: “Shit happened. I’ll tell you later. Let me see what this idiot wants first.”

“Maybe you forgot something in class,” Feliciano said turning back to the TV set. Lovino knew his brother was just pretending to be interested in whatever he was watching, so Lovino took the phone and hid himself in the bathroom. It rang once, twice, and then Antonio picked it up.

“Yes?” he seemed breathless, as if he had been fighting for the receiver, and Lovino snorted when he heard Francis loudly complain in the background.

“It’s me,” Lovino said, sitting down on the cold floor with his back against the door.

“Hey,” Antonio greeted. Lovino heard Francis shouting Antonio’s name and the loud bang of a door shutting close. “Have you seen Gilbert, by the way? He’s not home yet.”

“Is this why you called me?” Lovino asked, feeling a painful twist in the stomach.

“No, but I thought I might ask,” Antonio said, laughing a little. “You are extremely good friends, aren’t you?” he asked then, and Lovino’s heart flipped in his chest when he detected the jealousy in the other’s tone of voice.

“Something tells me you don’t like having Gilbert in class,” Lovino said, rubbing his grin with a thumb. On the other side of the line, Antonio laughed.

“Do you?” Antonio asked. “You seemed quite moody today when...” he trailed off, as if Lovino knew what he was talking about. Both of them knew they weren’t talking about Gilbert anymore.

Lovino’s cheeks flushed hot. He wondered if that was the reason why Antonio called, to check out on him, ask him if Lovino was angry at him or something... before he realized that Antonio might not care at all about his feelings.

“I wasn’t.”

“Could have fooled me,” Antonio said.

Whatever the case, Lovino had to ask.

“Is that why you called?”

“I got worried,” Antonio said, something in his tone of voice made Lovino dizzy. “You are usually much more vocal when you don’t like something, and today...”

“Are you worried I didn’t like your choreography?” Lovino asked, teasingly.

A soft laugh.

“I might be, yes.”

“Trust me when I say I don’t like this at all,” Lovino said. “Bella absolutely adores it, though, and when a beautiful girl like her is happy then I’m happy too... I guess...”

“It was fun coming up with something that would suit you both,” Antonio said. “I think you are going to look good together.”

Lovino smirked. This conversation was pointless, Lovino thought balancing the phone between his shoulder and chin, but then again it was nice to hear Antonio’s voice. They’ve seen each other a couple of hours before, and here Lovino was: he missed him already.

“No, we are not,” Lovino said playing with a hangnail. “But whatever. Don’t worry about your skills as a tango teacher.”

“Aha, good to know.”

Pointless, pointless, pointless. Lovino should hang up. Antonio had no reason to call him and yet Lovino couldn’t bring himself to press the hung up button.

“Are you still moody?”

“I had a shitty evening,” Lovino replied.

“How come?”

Antonio’s interest sounded so real, Lovino’s mouth opened on his own accord and started talking. He told Antonio everything, about Gilbert and Roderich, about Elizabeta, omitting the speech her soon to be ex gave him. Antonio listened to him, laughing when he repeated Gilbert’s asinine jokes.

Why was it so easy to talk about anything and nothing like they really believed it to be important? Lovino could do this forever and dreaded for the moment he had to hang up and wait to hear Antonio’s again. Suddenly, he realized he didn’t feel under the weather anymore. Antonio managed to make him feel better about himself without doing anything.

Lovino didn’t care about his mixed feelings anymore. They didn’t matter. Whatever Gilbert said about Antonio didn’t matter. He was going to enjoy this while it lasted. Lovino shouldn’t feel compelled to do anything about it. As Roderich said, neither of them had any intention to

ask the other to dance with him for real. If that wasn't an issue, then all Lovino feared was pointless, just like this conversation.

Let him enjoy this while it lasted.

It was Feliciano's soft knocking that jolted him out of his dream.

"Guess I need to hang up," Lovino said. Antonio breathing softly on the other side was soothing.

"Good night, Lovi," Antonio said.

"G-good night," Lovino repeated, hung up and stood up from the floor, feeling as his legs were going to buckle under him at any moment.

"Are you okay in there?" Feliciano asked.

Lovino said yes. Did he say it out loud? Everything felt like a dream. Was he dreaming? He was.

He probably had imagined everything that had happened to him in the last few hours.

What was wrong with him?

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

From now on I'm going to refer to my beta, TheCrystalFalls, as the co-pilot of the "Dance with Me" airplane. She's more than a beta to me, she's a friend, a co-author and a lovely person. Thank you, dear. <3

Chapter Nine

"I thought this was a competition for newbies?" Gilbert muttered under his breath, trying to keep up with Elizabeta's swift moves. Encouraged by the woman's snort, Gilbert insisted, "This is fucking ridiculous. And hard. Hey, Lizzie, do you know what else is hard—*OW!*"

"Gilbert, focus!" Elizabeta hissed between her teeth, elegantly putting her hand back on Gilbert's shoulder as if she hadn't just punched him on the side of the head.

Ignoring the buzzing in his ears, Gilbert grinned and kept dancing. Lovino watched him spin Elizabeta around like a spinning top, laughing like an idiot when Elizabeta wobbled in his arms the moment she found herself face to face with him again.

"They're adorable," Bella whispered next to Lovino's ear. "But Matthew and Kat truly melt my heart."

Lovino shifted his gaze to the third pair in the ballroom and noticed the small, soft smile reflected on the couple's faces as they locked eyes. His attention, however, was completely stolen by Antonio's steps echoing against the wooden floor. The Spaniard followed Matthew every move, correcting their stance whenever he thought it was necessary.

"They are going to date for real by the end of next month," Bella predicted.

"Are you sure they aren't already?" Lovino asked instead, tearing his gaze away from Antonio and letting it linger on Bella's knowing grin instead.

"Hello?" she said, a laugh escaping her throat. "They are Matthew and Katyusha!"

"Fair enough," Lovino said, her amusement reflecting in his own eyes. "What about us?"

"Us?" Bella asked, teasingly. "There was an 'us' and I had no idea?"

"You've been speculating about everyone but us two," Lovino said. "Am I not boyfriend material for you?"

“Stop flirting,” Bella said, playfully slapping his on the shoulder. “We both know you only have eyes for our gorgeous tango teacher.”

At that, Lovino’s stare was drawn to Antonio again, who was now giving his undivided attention to Gilbert and his two left feet. Bella followed his line of vision and her whole demeanor softened.

“Forget about what I said,” Bella whispered, placing her head on Lovino’s shoulder. “I stan for you two the most.”

“I...” Lovino bit his lips, suddenly aware he had nothing to say. It didn’t make sense to argue with Bella about that. She knew. Right in that moment, Antonio clapped Gilbert on the back and walked over to them to check them out too.

“Keep your back straight, Bella,” Antonio said. Bella immediately did as told, slowly raising her head from Lovino’s shoulder. They rearranged their potion to each other and started their choreography right from the beginning.

“Unclench your fingers,” Antonio reproached, his fingers lingering above Lovino’s. “Relax.” If only Antonio’s warm voice didn’t tickle the back of head! Lovino’s grasp on Bella weakened, his skin prickled with anticipation, as if suddenly awakened by Antonio’s proximity. He breathed deeply in and out.

“I think you got the first part of the dance,” Antonio said, nodding at them in appreciation. “What do you say if I show you the next few steps?”

“Finally!” Gilbert exclaimed from his place in the middle of the ballroom. “I was sick and tired of doing the same again and again.”

“Antonio wasn’t talking to you, dipshit!” Lovino shouted, letting go of Bella to face Gilbert head on. Antonio, on his part, burst out laughing and threw a pitying look Gilbert’s way.

“You still need to memorize the first steps, Gilbert,” Antonio said. “I’m sorry, Elizabeta.”

Elizabeta glared at Gilbert, grabbed him by the arms and unceremoniously pressed him against her. He let out a feeble cry of protest for being manhandled like that, but then, under her scrutinizing stare, his expression turned determined. Clearly taking his choreography seriously, Gilbert tried to lead Elizabeta into the dance.

To Lovino’s eyes he looked like a walking log.

“Lovino,” Bella whispered, abruptly moving away from Lovino’s embrace. She looked up at Antonio and Lovino with a sheepish smile and explained: “I need to go to the bathroom.”

Without waiting for some response, Bella rushed out of the ballroom. No one paid attention to her; Matthew and Katyusha giggled at each other mistakes, while Elizabeta and Gilbert fought for the lead. Suddenly alone with Antonio, Lovino felt uneasy.

“You’re doing great,” Antonio congratulated them. Lovino hid his blush by shrugging and turning to the side.

“Bella’s fine,” Lovino mumbled. “I’m not that good.”

“Do you want to practice together while Bella’s away?” Antonio’s words took Lovino completely by surprise, but when he looked up at him he saw nothing but professionalism on the other’s face. Stretching his hand to him, Antonio silently asked him to dance, and Lovino took his sweet time to come up with an answer.

Finally, Lovino accepted.

Antonio’s took Bella’s place. It was strange to be suddenly pressed against a much more muscular body, although Antonio felt soft under Lovino’s fingers, as if he could indeed break him if he grasped tighter. The truth was, though, that the one close to shattering into a million of tiny pieces was Lovino. His heart couldn’t stand the proximity. Antonio’s scent was inebriating, confusing like the first time Lovino felt it. There was a huge difference, though. This time, there was nothing sexual about it. Lovino surrendered himself in Antonio’s arm, holding onto him tight, afraid of losing him. A moment of hesitation and the magic would be lost.

Antonio waited for him to make the first step; Lovino did.

Contrary to Bella, Antonio didn’t draw any line between them. If the choreography demanded him to brush against Lovino’s arm, he did it. If he thought it was more aesthetically pleasing to put his leg in a certain way, he did. Lovino was going to die if Antonio kept it up.

The curves of their bodies fit perfectly against each other in a way Lovino haven't experienced with anyone else.

Moving to the sound of the music Antonio had chosen for Gilbert and Elizabeta, Lovino wondered how they came to this. All the flirting, all those innuendos and the puns they threw at each other when they first met were of no importance now. Immature games between adults.

This, however.

This was fucking real.

Lovino Vargas started taking tango lessons completely by accident.

Lovino Vargas’s attraction to Antonio was completely accidental.

Who would have thought that one day he wouldn't mind those hands roaming over his body? That he would be dancing with his teacher as if there was nothing in the room but the two of them?

Who would have thought that he wouldn’t mind his friends’ eyes on him as he practiced his choreography with Antonio? Who would have thought Lovino wanted to keep dancing with him out of this ballroom too, out in the streets, maybe in an apartment they would call their own?

The sound of heels clicking against the wooden tiles, so similar to an alarm clock, roused him from his nice dream. Antonio's arms unwrapped from his body; Lovino took a step backwards.

"Is this how we look like?" Bella asked, lips parted in amazement. "I didn't think this choreography was so sensual!"

"That's tango," Antonio said with a laugh. Without looking back, he walked back to the CD recorder to put another piece of music on.

A clap of his hands and the three pairs resumed their dancing as if nothing magical had just happened.

Lovino was suddenly scared of himself.

When Gilbert proposed to walk to the bus stop together, Lovino was ready to turn him down. Three minutes of incessant whining later, Lovino finally agreed. Could they link arms too? No, that was out of the question. Obviously.

"Tango is much more fun than I expected," Gilbert said as an ice-breaker; Lovino scoffed. "Oh, *come on*. We both know you are enjoying this immensely..."

"I am not," Lovino defended himself. "I prefer to stay at home and mind my own business."

"Yes, right." Gilbert's teasing tone did no favors to Lovino's mood. "Rolling in the sheets with your special someone is much more fun than dancing with him with all your clothes on."

"I swear I'm going to cut your throat one day," Lovino hissed between his teeth, but Gilbert's bark of laughter literally quashed his threat.

"You'd miss me," Gilbert said. He pat Lovino on the back in an overly friendly manner. If someone from work bumped into them by chance, they would never guess the real nature of their relationship: the boss and the poor, unfortunate employee. Lovino was aware of what they looked like to an outsider.

"I've known Antonio for a while," Gilbert declared, ignoring the smile of disbelief that crossed on Lovino's face. As they walked side by side, Gilbert's shoulder kept brushing against Lovino's. It was impossible that Gilbert was doing it on purpose, but then again, it wasn't exactly unpleasant. It was a simple gesture that held the promise of constant support and friendship.

"Yes, you're roommates." Hoping that stating the obvious would shut Gilbert up, Lovino kept walking to the bus stop. He let his eyes wander over the graffiti on the bus stop shelter before he sat down on the creaking metal bench under it.

"No shit, Sherlock," Gilbert said, rolling his eyes upwards. Groaning as if he had been hiking for miles, Gilbert plopped down next to him. "My first impression of him was not a good

one. He came with Francis to check my apartment out. I could afford the rent by myself, you know, but I liked the idea of having someone to share it with.”

Lovino clicked his tongue.

“I don’t really care about your fears of being lonely.”

“That’s not it--!” Gilbert immediately defended himself, but when he shared a look with Lovino, his expression softened. “I’m not going to take the bait, Lovino. You won’t manage to change subject.”

“I’m not trying to do anything.”

He gave Lovino a skeptical look. “So-!” Gilbert continued, clapping his hands. “What was I saying? Ah, yes. I liked Francis from the get-go. Antonio... not so much. That changed, obviously.”

“You can keep your stories for yourself,” Lovino huffed.

“It’s a *funny* story,” Gilbert reassured him with a chuckle. “We went out drinking to get to know each other better. Antonio drank two beers more than he should of and, guess what? He ended up beating me to a pulp.”

“And that’s funny how?!” Lovino screeched, scandalized.

“Well, no one managed to beat me at arm wrestling except my brother. But, damn, Antonio was fucking strong and he’s violent when he’s drunk. I’m not going to pretend I wasn’t drunk too. When he won the third time around, I saw red and punched him. He punched me right back.”

“Oh, my God,” Lovino drawled, massaging his temples. “*Are you for real?*”

Gilbert laughed.

“I liked him in that moment,” Gilbert said. “He knocked on my door, all stupid smiles and stuff, and a few hours later he showed me he was not the guy I thought he was. I truly liked him, and nose still bloody, I shook his hand and declared they were going to be my roommates.”

“You three need to go straight back to the asylum,” Lovino said, laughing against his will. At that, Gilbert looked at him in wonder.

“You do have a sense of humor!” Gilbert teased him. Lovino’s response was immediate. He made to elbow Gilbert in the side, but failed miserably. Sitting side by side like that, Lovino had not enough room to strike a good blow.

Laughing at Lovino’s disappointment, Gilbert wrapped his arm around his shoulder and pulled him closer.

“May I let you in on a secret?” Gilbert asked in a whisper. Still trying to free himself from Gilbert’s grasp, Lovino grunted. “I like you too.”

“What?” Lovino stopped pulling away and look up at him.

“I-like-you.” Gilbert spelled the words as if he were talking to a baby. Grin wide, he let him go and shoved his hands into his pocket. “You’re an asshole, man, but you’re a pretty cool one.”

“What the hell, Gilbert,” Lovino muttered with a huff.

“Just accept a compliment for once!” Gilbert reproached.

“Calling me an asshole is the worst compliment I ever received.”

“I said you were cool too!”

“You called me an asshole, you fucker.”

“*Anyway*,” Gilbert changed subject. “You have my blessing.”

At that, Lovino’s eyes grew as wide as saucers.

“Your *what*??”

Grinning like the Cheshire cat, Gilbert said: “I have eyes, Lovino. It’s obvious you and Antonio have the hots for each other. When you danced together before-!”

“That was- that was just-!” Lovino cut him. “Will you finally shut the fuck up?”

Gilbert giggled. A weird sound coming from that huge, albino man. Lovino watched him for a long silent moment, trying to gauge the expression on the other’s face. It was pointless. He couldn’t really tell if Gilbert was messing with him or not.

Judging by the tender smile that caressed the other’s face, he was probably not.

“You two have a lot in common, I give you that,” Gilbert said, giving him a look-over that Lovino found totally out of place. “But you are much better than him, if you want my opinion.”

“What the hell...”

Gilbert sighed. Turning his head towards the empty road stretching in front of them, the albino leaned his back against the bench.

“Francis knows him better than I do, and there are things he told me about Antonio’s past that really bother me.”

“Like?”

Lovino shouldn't act so interested, but the question left his mouth before he could think it over.

"What things?" Lovino prodded when Gilbert fell uncharacteristically silent.

"Apparently he was some kind of 'gang' member," Gilbert said, emphasizing his words with his fingers. "You know, your typical bully that fights a lot with other bullies."

Lovino remembered something Antonio told him long before.

"How come did they let you take classes then?" Lovino had asked.

"They didn't know. Not for the first six months, at least. I just happened to barge into Mr. Romero's class trying to get away from bullies. I used to piss people off when I was younger."

Lovino nodded, encouraging Gilbert to continue.

"I don't know all the facts," Gilbert said, running a hand through his hair. "But according to Francis, all Antonio thought of was money. His goal in life was to be someone important and to him that meant becoming one of the most influential men in his little town. His childhood friend had a hand in it, apparently. I don't remember her name, I don't know what she's doing right now either."

Lovino knew, but he kept his mouth shut.

"She was the daughter of the town's mayor and saw potential in Antonio, a very ambitious man who didn't hesitate to cut people off if he thought someone thwarted him."

Gilbert fell silent; Lovino grew restless.

"It's that why you told me he's only loyal to himself?" Lovino asked, wondering why his throat felt suddenly dry. Gilbert scrunched his nose.

"It's impossible to say what's on his mind," Gilbert admitted. "I doubt he does anything that's not in his best interests."

". . .Doesn't everyone?" Lovino muttered, but Gilbert clicked his tongue.

"No, not like he does." His tone was final.

"No," Lovino agreed, voice fading into a whisper.

"Are you really serious with him?" Gilbert asked. With a jolt, Lovino looked up at him in surprise. Suddenly uneasy, Gilbert shuffled his weight from one side to another. A rush of affection overwhelmed Lovino at the sight. Thinking back to when they first met, Lovino realized he had completely misunderstood Gilbert Beilschmidt's character. First impressions could be misleading, and he has been extremely hasty in his judgement. Granted, it was still impossible to believe that this man was related to his CEO, but now Lovino was ready to change opinion on Ludwig Beilschmidt too. What if he has been wrong about everyone?

Pulling his jacket up so it would cover part of his blushing face, Lovino lowered his gaze to his feet.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, voice muffled by the fabric in front of his mouth. Gilbert snapped his head towards him.

“I’ll talk with him, if you want me to,” Gilbert said. “I’ll try to figure out what his intentions are with you.”

Lovino shook his head.

“The bus is here,” he said instead, standing up the moment he noticed the bus’s light flashing at them.

Lovino supposed he should be the one to talk to Antonio first. That thing between them had no name, it didn’t quite meet the criteria for the infamous fuck buddies category. At least for Lovino, that phase was over. He longed more for long phone calls like the one they had some nights before rather than rolling around in each other’s beds as Gilbert put it. Sexual attraction alone wasn’t enough. The question was, did Antonio feel the same?

Probably not.

Heart flipping in his chest, Lovino realized he should stop this thing as soon as possible.

He was entering unknown territory. And what if he fucked this up? What if he made Feliciano’s mistake? He didn’t want to go through a break-up like his brother. He didn’t want to end up like Gilbert, following an impossible dream. He didn’t want to end up like Elizabeta, who secretly believed in love and ignored how much her divorce was hurting her. He didn’t want to end up like Roderich, who just gave up on everything and claimed to be happy with his situation. He wanted to be like Matthew and Katyusha, walking on the tip of their toes, ready to fly into the darkness and hope the fall wasn’t going to hurt. He wanted that, and at the same time he didn’t.

As long as Antonio and he just shared a bed once or twice every week, Lovino was safe. His heart was safe.

But he was warming up to Antonio and that wasn’t safe at all.

And if Antonio was what Gilbert feared he was, a heartless bastard who would always put himself first, then Lovino was screwed.

No, he wasn’t ready to trust him with this.

Lovino needed to talk to Antonio.

As soon as possible.

Before it was too late.

His chance came when Lovino last expected it. He had forgotten his wrist watch at Antonio's apartment, so he dropped by one Saturday morning with the excuse to get it back. He didn't even like that watch that much--a birthday gift from Feliciano's friend Feliks three years before. The hands of the watch were little ponies, which made it a kids' watch, but it was red (Lovino's favorite color) and the numbers were legible.

Fortunately, it was Antonio who opened the door. Stepping inside the apartment, Lovino heard Gilbert's loud snoring coming from one of the rooms. Francis, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen.

"He had a date yesterday," Antonio explained. No more words were needed.

"I don't care," Lovino said. "I'm here for my watch. I must have left it here."

"A watch?" Antonio asked, tilting his head to the side. He considered it for a moment, then his bright eyes lit up. "The one with the ponies? It's yours?"

"It was a stupid gift," Lovino mumbled.

"It was cute," Antonio said, ruffling Lovino's hair. "Just like you."

"About that."

The words were out before his mind could register them. Antonio made a strange grimace with his lips, a confused smile of sorts, but Lovino didn't explain further. With a nod, Antonio walked to his room and came a second later with Lovino's watch.

"Today's a nice day," Antonio said. "Wanna go somewhere?"

No. Don't do this to me. Lovino kept his thoughts for himself.

Of course he wanted to.

He let his eyes linger over Antonio's beautiful face that never failed to calm his nerves. His arms were strong, perfect for when Lovino needed moral support. Underneath that skin and muscle, a heart was beating fast. It made Lovino wonder how he could make it beat even faster.

"My brother is waiting for me back home..." Lovino explained. Antonio didn't seem to pick up on the lie.

"Oh, okay."

Lovino should ask him.

(By the way, do you want to talk about the past? I grew up with my grandfather and my brother. It was fine until it was not anymore, until he passed away and I had to be both a mother and a father to Feliciano.)

No. Antonio wouldn't care.

“Antonio,” Lovino called him. It was now or never. Tear it off, fast like a Band-Aid.

He should ask.

(Hey, Antonio. Is it true what Gilbert said? Is it true you don't care about anyone but yourself?)

“Yes, Lovino?” Antonio asked. His voice. God, his voice.

Lovino should finally grow some balls and *ask*. Perhaps Antonio would tell him the truth, admit he had been a bully, that the only person he really loved was that damn Isabela.

But what if?

(Hey, Antonio, what if I feel something for you? What would you do about it? Should we continue down this road or stop it right here? What if you like me back? What should I do in that case?)

“What’s wrong?” Antonio asked when Lovino didn’t answer. He took a step forwards, closer to him, and Lovino panicked.

“I don’t want to do this anymore.”

Fuck. That wasn’t what he had planned to say.

Not that he was sure about what he wanted either.

What if Antonio told him that he changed? That he was a good man, that he might have fallen in love with him? What would Lovino do with that information? How could he protect himself then? Wouldn’t it be better if he didn’t know? If he pretended they were just friends who liked to fuck sometime?

Did friends even do that?

Were they friends at this point?

What were they?

“You don’t want what?” Antonio asked, tilting his head. He sounded sincerely confused, and Lovino took a big breath before he confessed part of what was bothering him:

“Fucking around,” he said, the lump in his throat preventing him from saying the words clearly. He coughed. “This has gone far enough already.”

Antonio’s betrayed look was gone in an instant, soon replaced by a weird smile that implied condescension.

“Fine,” he said, standing taller. “You make the rules, after all.”

The statement caught Lovino off-guard.

“What rules?”

“*Your* rules. About this,” Antonio said, waving his hand around. “Fine, whatever you wish. I guess I’ll see you in class then?” Oblivious expression on his face, voice that sounded cheerful enough, as if nothing was the matter. As if Lovino haven’t-

“Are you serious?” Lovino asked, blood suddenly boiling in anger. “I just told you I-!”

“I heard that,” Antonio piped up. Lovino’s mouth twisted into a grimace.

“So you don’t really care.”

“Lovino, it’s *fine*,” Antonio said, although it was clearly not.

“Fine,” Lovino repeated, shrugging his shoulders. “Everything is fine then. Is that all you have to say about this?”

Antonio groaned: “What do you want me to say?”

Lovino fumbled with his watch, trying to put it on before he gave up and shoved it in his jacket’s inner pocket. “I thought you would try to convince me that it’s nice or... something.”

Antonio let out a laugh.

“If it were nice, as you put it, you wouldn’t have asked me to stop in the first place,” Antonio reasoned, arching his eyebrows in amusement.

“It’s more complicated than that,” Lovino said, averting his gaze. “You see I-!”

“Lovino,” Antonio cut him, a tone that admitted no bullshit. “If you want to go fuck someone else, just say it.”

What the hell.

“Is that what this is all about?” Lovino asked in disbelief. “You think I found someone to replace you?”

Antonio huffed.

“You did say we weren’t exclusive,” Antonio said matter-of-factly.

“I thought you knew me better than this by now,” Lovino hissed.

The scoff was like a slap to the face. “You didn’t give me a lot of chances to know you better, did you?” Antonio asked. “You always pull away from me. Whenever I suggest to do something different, you turn on your heels and flee.”

“I don’t do that.”

“Lovino,” Antonio said, sounding exhausted. “It’s really early in the morning. Can we drop the matter?”

“No!” Lovino whined. “You really think so low of me? Do I need to remind you that you-!”

“Please, Lovino, don’t put the blame on me now,” Antonio cut him, looking pained as he uttered the words. “I was against it from the very beginning. You invited me in your house and kissed me first, remember? You started it.”

Jumping backwards in shock, Lovino stared at him wide-eyed.

“And now you clearly got tired of me and want to move on,” Antonio continued. “I’m not your boy-toy, Lovi. Stop trying to make me the bad guy here.”

“I’m not trying to-!”

“Listen,” Antonio cut him, harsh. “You started it and now you want to finish it. We play by your rules, it’s crystal clear. My opinion on this doesn’t matter, so I won’t even bother.”

Lovino stepped backwards. This was something he hadn’t predicted.

He had been so caught up on his own feelings, Lovino hadn’t even thought Antonio might have a different view on their relationship.

“You think I’m using you?” Lovino asked, disbelief written all over his face.

“You’re not?” Antonio asked, his bitter smile rubbing Lovino the wrong way.

“Antonio. You flirted with me first,” Lovino said, the rage tinting his cheeks red. “You-!”

“I’m risking my job for you,” Antonio cut him. Again. Antonio never let him finish a sentence, he-- wait, what? As if he could read Lovino’s mind, Antonio explained: “I’m not supposed to date any of my students. If they catch us, they’re going to fire me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that earlier?” Lovino asked, taken completely aback.

“Oh, *now* you care about me,” Antonio replied instead. The tone of his voice infuriated him.

“You wanna piss me off, is that it?”

Antonio shrugged.

Irritating.

“I care about you more than you care about *me*, you fucking idiot,” Lovino blurted. The words sent him stepping backwards, but his confession shocked him more than it did Antonio.

Unimpressed, Antonio asked: “Why can’t you just admit you got fed up with me? You told me you’re sick and tired of this. Lovino, seriously, I’m not blind. You don’t want to do anything with me. You clearly prefer to spend your time with other people... like Gilbert.”

“Gilbert? What the fuck does this have to do with Gilbert?”

“I saw how you act with him.”

“You think there’s something between us??”

Oh, how the tables have turned.

Antonio gave him a look over, and Lovino got a glimpse of the possessive and heartless guy he’d never seen before. Perhaps Gilbert was right. Antonio was not the guy Lovino thought he was.

“You have no idea what you are talking about,” Lovino snapped. “This is not about me and Gilbert. This is about you! We both know that the one using me is you!”

“Since when?” Antonio asked.

“Since you started hitting on me!”

“I told you I don’t sleep with whomever,” Antonio stated. “I meant every word. You clearly didn’t.”

“That’s not true.”

“Then tell me the truth, Lovi,” Antonio said. “Do you like Gilbert?”

“He’s my boss,” was the immediate response. “And my friend,” he added after a moment of thought.

Antonio waited.

“I’m not your possession.” Lovino stared at him straight in the eyes; Antonio tilted his head.

“But I’m yours? Is that how it works?”

Fuck. No.

When Lovino didn’t answer immediately, Antonio continued:

“Make up your mind, Lovino, what do you want?”

Lovino had no idea.

All he could think of was to escape. Get out of this situation, keep a distance. Or ask. State the same question out-loud, see what Antonio would say. Would he even defend himself?

Throat dry, Lovino’s mind went blank.

He was walking far too near to the rim of a cliff. He could fall at any moment, lose himself and hope someone would catch him before he crashed on the ground. Like Roderich said. No, Lovino was not ready for that.

“I’ll see you in class.”

For a moment, Lovino truly believed that the one who uttered the words had been Antonio, but a glimpse at Antonio's hard stare made him realize that Lovino had ended the conversation.

"Fine."

Antonio looked extremely calm, cold even, and Lovino couldn't stand the sight. Without another word, he turned on his heels and left Antonio's apartment.

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

“Get. Up.”

The order was clear, authoritarian. Lovino had never thought this type of voice would ever come out from that lanky body standing at the foot of his bed. It was quite a contradicting picture. *Congratulations, Ludwig. Your authority rubbed off on my brother all too well.*

When Feliciano’s good will was not dignified with an answer, he puffed out his chest, placed his hands on his hips, opened his mouth and....

“GET UP!”

Wow. The boy could shout.

Lovino glared. If there was something he could say to be particularly proud of was how stubborn he could be. He was not going to go down without a proper fight, no sir.

“No.” Snuggling farther into the covers, Lovino pulled the pillow over his head and left his hand out in the open to present his brother with his middle finger. Groaning, Feliciano started pulling at Lovino’s comforter; Lovino retaliated. (“I said no, you son of a--!” “Don’t say it, Lovino Vargas!”). Pull up, pull down, pull up again, the sheets started tearing at the seams.

“ENOUGH!”

Lovino glanced under his pillow at the exasperated face of none other than Elizabeta. Great, she was there too. Did that mean Gilbert was waiting in the other room? Lovino suddenly let go of his comforter and snickered when Feliciano fell down with a loud ‘oof’. When no one but Elizabeta came to his brother’s rescue, Lovino assumed Gilbert was not around to kick him in the butt.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Elizabeta asked, helping Feliciano back on his feet. Lovino patted his bed, punched the pillow once and laid back down.

“I’m sick.” He had repeated the same thing so many times already he ended up believing it. How else could he explain the state of disarray his heart was in? His stomach ached, his chest ached, his head ached. Couldn’t Elizabeta see how pale he was?

Apparently she couldn’t, because Elizabeta didn’t look convinced in the least. Arching her eyebrow, she practically slapped her hand against Lovino’s forehead to measure his temperature.

“You’ve got no fever,” she declared.

“He’s got nothing,” Feliciano said, sniffing.

Lovino pointed a finger at him: “You shut up.”

“You’ve been missing work *and* tango classes,” Elizabeta chimed in. “Do you know how worried we are? Antonio keeps asking about you.”

“He’s not.” As soon as the words left his mouth, Lovino mentally slapped himself. An arched eyebrow was the only response Elizabeta dignified him with.

“It’s useless, Lizzie.” Feliciano said. “He’s being acting like a baby for the past three days. He refuses to go to work, and I had to call Ludwig to explain the situation to him.” His voice broke mid-sentence. “He doesn’t want to get out of bed.” Feliciano quickly changed subject and faced Elizabeta with his red-rimmed eyes, ready to get the sniffles.

Lovino thought he was a strong man, but seeing Feliciano on the verge of crying has always made him feel like an asshole. He would bet his head the bastard knew and did it intentionally.

“Fine,” Lovino stated, prodding himself up in a sitting position and kicking the comforter off the bed. At that, Elizabeta let out a yelp of surprise. Clearly, she didn’t expect Lovino to give up so easily. Feliciano, on the other hand, just did what he knew to do best: he quickly put a smile on his face and threw his arms around Lovino’s shoulders.

“Are you finally going to have lunch with me?” Feliciano asked, pressing his cheek against his brother’s. The gesture sent shivers run down Lovino’s spine; it was comforting, sure, but it reminded him too much of their father, of all the times he used to reassure them after a nightmare. He would have welcomed the old Vargas’ presence with open arms right now. He had always known what to do. He was a strong man, annoying and condescending sometimes, but he fought hard to give his sons a good future.

Lovino failed him.

Softly pushing Feliciano away, Lovino looked up at Elizabeta, asking her to leave with a pleading, surely pathetic glance. Skeptical, she tapped her foot against the floor and threw a worried look towards Feliciano, who seemed unaware of his brother’s desire to be left alone with him. Unfazed by the sudden tension, the young Vargas sat down next to Lovino. Their shoulders brushed against each other, and he got so near their peculiar curls formed a small heart above their heads.

Finally, Elizabeta gave up. “Okay,” she whispered. Her heels clacked loudly against the floor, but the annoying sound disappeared as soon as she closed the door behind her with a soft click.

“Will you finally tell me what’s wrong with you?” Feliciano asked, turning his full attention on his brother. Silence engulfed the room while Lovino considered the question. He looked down at the sunlight casting shadows on the wooden floor, his mind going back to one of the few mornings he woke up next to Antonio in his apartment.

Antonio’s room was a mess, but it couldn’t compare to the state Lovino’s bedroom was in that moment. His clothes were scrunched up on the floor, his socks have been tossed aside on

his chair and there were old newspapers piled up on the little desk Lovino had been using since he was a freshman. It was his father's idea of a joke after Lovino told him he couldn't stand Feliciano's whining. That day he said: "You can't complain anymore. I just provided you with your own desk so you finally can study in peace."

It never served its real purpose, and Lovino mostly used it as a trivet on which he could safely place his keys and his coffee stained mugs. As if Lovino had been trying to break a new record, his desk was now covered with so much junk it actually threatened to break at any moment. Three days ago Feliciano had offered to clean it up a little; Lovino obviously refused.

"Do you ever think of dad?" Lovino asked, lowering his voice to a shaky whisper. Tilting his head to the side, Feliciano nudged Lovino with his shoulder and flashed him an encouraging smile.

"What kind of question is that? Of course I do!"

"It's just a question," Lovino immediately defended himself.

Feliciano drew a deep breath. "Is that what this is all about?"

"Not exactly..." Lovino fiddled with his hands, debating whether to spring out of bed and walk away from this conversation or lift that weight from his chest and start breathing normally again.

Annoyed by the prolonged silence, Feliciano poked Lovino's arm. "So?"

"He was a real womanizer, wasn't he?" His question took Feliciano totally by surprise. The confusion written all over his brother's face would have made a beautiful picture to frame if it weren't for the fact Lovino felt like a total douchebag about it. Great way to start a conversation: reminding Feliciano, who saw their father as the picture of virtue and strength, that Julius Vargas had been a human being too.

But 'asshole' was his default state of being, wasn't it? That's what Antonio thought, that's what everybody thought. *The bastard*. Who did he think he was? Telling Lovino such things... he had been the one to-

Fuck it. Lovino didn't want to think about him.

"I'm just saying." Voice harsh, Lovino turned around so that he wouldn't need to face Feliciano head on. His brother's hands immediately gave his shoulders a reassuring squeeze. Lovino unwillingly sighed. "Okay." That said, he stood up from the bed.

"Do you remember how many women he brought home after mom died?" Lovino asked. Pacing around the room seemed to be the most sensible thing to do to sooth his nerves, but his legs were rooted to the floor, as if he would even take a step forward he could fall down and never get back up again.

"Huh..." Feliciano's confusion just grew by the second. "Lots?"

“Lots,” Lovino repeated, crossing his arms over his chest. “He slept with whomever, didn’t he? It didn’t matter, as long as he had fun. Do you think he ever had a serious relationship?”

Worry flashed across Feliciano’s face. “Are you saying that he wasn’t serious with mom either?”

“I didn’t--!” Lovino sighed again. Rewind. Rewind. Feliciano was taking it the wrong way. “No, I am not saying he wasn’t serious with her. On the contrary, she had been the one, you know?” he asked, accompanying his words with vague gestures of his hands. “He was just afraid to do the same mistake after she died. You understand what I’m getting at?”

“No, I don’t,” Feliciano promptly replied. Lovino snorted.

“You *do*, and I do too, because, apparently, that’s a Vargas thing,” Lovino said, mocking. “Dad’s relationships were superficial, meaningless to say the least.”

“I’m sure that every time he brought a woman home, he truly believed that they were going to be our next mom,” Feliciano said with a tilt of his head, “but I’m glad they never lasted. No one can replace mom.”

“Exactly!” Lovino exclaimed, pointing his finger at him. Noticing the baffled look on Feliciano’s face, he lowered his hands again. “You don’t commit to people you don’t love.”

“Hmm... yeah, well...” Feliciano bit his bottom lip. “That’s the point, right?” At that, Lovino’s heartbeat sped up. “Then again,” Feliciano said after a moment of thought. “If you never give people a chance...”

“You don’t really mean this,” Lovino interrupted him. Ashamed, Feliciano looked away. The awkward silence that suddenly formed between the two of them made Lovino uneasy. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other until the tension became unbearable. “Sorry about that.”

“No, you’re right.”

“I agree with you, though,” Lovino said, scratching his arm in embarrassment when Feliciano raised his eyes to him again. “Mom was irreplaceable.”

Running a hand through his messy hair, Lovino started pacing around the room. The wooden tiles felt warm under his bare feet; a comforting sensation that was soon spoiled by the memory of Antonio walking around his apartment barefoot. He wondered what he was doing right now before he mentally reproached himself for thinking about that bastard.

“I believe...” Feliciano suddenly piped up, furrowing his eyebrows deep in thought. “... everybody in our lives is irreplaceable in one way or another.”

Lovino humphed. “They shouldn’t be irreplaceable. What’s the point? People always leave you sooner or later.” His own words sent a cruel pang to heart. He stopped in mid track and encircled his arms around his body, suddenly feeling cold. “You will too,” he whispered, the sudden realization freezing him to the spot.

“Don’t say that.” Feliciano hurriedly stood up. “It’s that what’s worrying you? You think I’m going to leave you? I’m not!”

Lovino puckered his lips. Time to be an asshole again. “Well, you almost did when you started dating Beilschmidt, didn’t you?”

His words sent Feliciano stumbling backwards. Lovino groaned, annoyed, and leaned against his wardrobe. The back of his head hit against the hard wood and he let out a hiss of pain.

“Forget I said that,” Lovino said. His brother’s features momentarily hardened, only to soften up a second later.

“You should be happy,” Feliciano retorted. “I dumped him, didn’t I?”

“How’s that ever going to make me happy?” Lovino rolled his eyes upwards and slid down the wardrobe to the floor.

“Well, you’ve never liked him in the first place.”

“I like no one *at first*.”

Feliciano’s arched his eyebrow. “At first?”

“Fuck,” Lovino swore under his breath and hid his face in his hands. Somewhere in the room Feliciano sighed. Lovino didn’t dare to move to check what Feliciano was doing. He heard his brother pace around the room until he finally made up his mind and sat down next to Lovino on the floor.

“This is not about me and Ludwig, isn’t it?” Feliciano asked softly. “Tell me it isn’t.”

“No, it’s not.” Lovino muffled reply was heartbreaking even to his own ears. “It’s about-- Nothing. It’s about nothing.”

“Lovino...” The condescending tone was doing wonders for Lovino’s mood.

“The last time I tried to open my fucking heart to someone it went incredibly wrong,” Lovino mumbled. “Don’t make me do it again.”

Feliciano didn’t answer immediately. “Being brokenhearted is not a good reason to stay three days in bed.” Feliciano dared a smile when Lovino looked up at him in disbelief. His fingers found a strand of Lovino’s hair and brushed it softly. “Don’t look so surprised. I could see you were in love from *miles*.”

“I am not-! That’s stupid,” Lovino said, hiding the growing blush on his cheeks behind his palms.

“We both have commitment issues, huh, Lovi?” Feliciano said, tone bittersweet. “It’s that what you were striving for when you started talking about dad?”

“Probably,” Lovino conceded with a shrug.

“You feel you have been acting like him?”

“If I needed a psychologist, I would have asked for one,” Lovino snapped. “Don’t get into my head!”

Feliciano laughed, brushing Lovino’s hair once more. “You don’t need a psychologist. I understand you better than anyone.”

“No, you don’t.”

Feliciano didn’t argue with him, as much as Lovino wanted to end this conversation with a fight. It was easier to have Feliciano be mad at him rather than being overwhelmed by waves of love and understanding. He didn’t deserve this kind of treatment.

Antonio surely didn’t think he did.

“Are you going to get out of this room now?” Feliciano asked, a soft smile gracing his lips.

“You go first.”

Feliciano burst out laughing again. “I’m going to make something for lunch and I want you in the kitchen in ten, mister!” he said, standing up. Lovino remained just where he was, hugging his legs close to his chest.

“Hey, Feli,” Lovino called him before his brother could open the door. “For your information...” the lump in his throat made it difficult to speak, but he wanted to say that at least. “... I am not happy that you and Ludwig are not together anymore.” Feliciano’s inquiring stare made him feel vulnerable. “I’ve never minded him that much, so I would lie if I said that I started dancing in the rain because you dumped him. Fuck, the truth is,” he ran a hand through his hair, “as long as they are not a psychopath, who you date is the least of my problems. You could have brought home the richest, most handsome guy in Bananaland and I would have reacted just the same.”

Lowering his eyes on the floor, Feliciano let out an amused snort. He wrapped his fingers around the handle, but before he pushed the door open, Feliciano said:

“I know you care, but sometimes you forget I do too.”

Feliciano walked out.

Lovino dropped his head into his arms again, but he was not left long with his thoughts. Not even a second after Feliciano left him, he heard the door creak open.

“Now I understand why you’re acting like this,” Elizabeta said sitting down next to Lovino. “Did Antonio break your heart? I’m going to beat him to a pulp! What the hell happened?”

“Were you eavesdropping?” Lovino asked with an arch of an eyebrow. “And what the fuck? Why did you bring Antonio’s name up right now?”

Elizabeta grinned and put her arm around his shoulder in solidarity.

“Everybody knows you have the hots for him.”

“Did Gilbert--?”

“Oh, that pumpkin head knows too?”

Her honest reaction surprised Lovino immensely. Shocked, Lovino didn’t find it in him to push Elizabeta’s arm away.

“Oh, come on.” Rolling her eyes to the ceiling, she stretched her legs and clicked her heels together. “I’ve told you before, didn’t I? Antonio likes you and it’s obvious you like him back.”

“I don’t like that nutjob,” Lovino declared, “and he sure as fucking hell doesn’t like me back!”

“Is that what he said?” Elizabeta asked, anger seeping through her words. “Is that why you are hiding in bed?”

“I’m not—!” Lovino bit his lip, hard. “He said nothing of the sort. I just *know*, okay? Don’t pressure me into telling you what happened.”

Nodding, Elizabeta took her arm away and intertwined their fingers together instead, despite Lovino’s feeble protests.

“I’m not going to press you into anything,” Elizabeta declared, “but just tell me yes or no, Lovi. Does Antonio have something to do with *this*?”

Lovino wondered if he should lie.

“Yes.”

Elizabeta scrunched her nose. “Do you want me to confront him about it?”

“Absolutely not.”

Elizabeta looked at him and let her eyes wander over his face, as if trying to decrypt a riddle written with a permanent marker across his forehead. Angry and relieved at the same time, Elizabeta seemed to mentally debate whether to stay next to Lovino or set the city ablaze.

“It’s my fault, damn it!” The words were out of his mouth before Lovino’s mind could register them. Sincerely surprised, all of Elizabeta’s anger washed off her face. “Don’t-!” He sighed. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay.”

Lovino rested his head against the wardrobe and felt Elizabeta do the same next to him.

“Your brother is going to throw a fit if you don’t get out of your room soon.”

“Lizzie,” Lovino said instead, following the dust flattering between the sunlight. “Why did you agree to date Gilbert? We both know it’s not going to work.”

“Who said that?” Elizabeta said, surprised. Lovino moved his head to look at her in the eye.

“It’s obvious you don’t like him that way,” he said. “I feel like you’re just… playing with him.”

Elizabeta sighed. “He’s a brat.” As soon as the insult escaped her throat, a smile grew on her lips. “But he’s cool. I think I’ll give him a chance.”

“You will?” Lovino asked, raising his eyebrows in surprise. She shrugged.

“Perhaps it’s not going to work and he’s going to fall in love with Roderich instead,” she giggled, “but I’m curious anyway. Don’t tell him I said that, but I do like him.”

“Seriously?” Lovino asked, tilting his head. “He’s an arrogant ass.”

“Not always,” she said with a wide grin. “Since Roderich likes him too, even if he won’t never admit it, I know I’m doing the right thing.”

“So you are going to give him a chance, even if he acts like a spoiled baby most of the time,” Lovino stated, letting out a snort when Elizabeta nodded.

“Yeah.” She slowly stood up, and still holding Lovino’s hand, she pulled him up to his feet. “Come on. Lunch smells so good I’m going to drool all over myself.”

Lovino laughed, a strange sound considering how awful he still felt. Finally he became aware of the mouth-watering aroma of pots simmering on the stove. Antonio was not worth an empty stomach. Antonio was not worth the trouble.

When Lovino finally decided to show up to tango class, he did it for Bella’s sake. There was a tango competition coming and he couldn’t leave her without a partner.

Antonio and Lovino’s eyes locked when he stepped in the ballroom, but they didn’t speak to each other. To a complete stranger Antonio could have even appeared detached, as if his mind was on other things, as if he weren’t looking at Lovino on purpose. However, there was an unmistakable flash of emotion in his green eyes that Lovino managed to get a glimpse of. He didn’t dare to decipher Antonio’s uncharacteristic silence and, feeling suddenly judged, Lovino lowered his head and kept walking.

A pair of arms encircled his waist, and Lovino breathed in Bella’s scent. Elizabeta and Gilbert patted him on the back, while Matthew and Katyusha asked him how he was in unison.

For the first time since he started taking tango classes, Lovino became aware that he had honest to God friends.

The music started playing, and Lovino felt happy as he repeated the basic steps with Bella in his arms.

What else did he need?

What else could he possibly want?

Antonio had been a mistake, and Lovino didn't need him. If he wanted a boyfriend or a fuck buddy, he could always replace him with someone else.

Is he replaceable, really? Something in the back of his mind whispered. Lovino paid the voice no heed and kept dancing.

Lovino was delusional. He seriously thought it would be easy to concentrate on tango and not look at Antonio, not even once.

The closer the day of the tango competition, however, the stricter Antonio became. At some point, it was practically impossible to avoid talking to him. Unaware of the tension between the two, Bella kept asking for Antonio's advice on their choreography so that he had to be constantly nearby. To be honest, Lovino had a feeling they were the only couple who had trouble with their steps.

Indeed, despite the low expectations everyone had on them, Elizabeta and Gilbert were doing a pretty good job with their routine. Gilbert still danced like a log with legs, but the two of them somehow managed to balance each other's weak points so that they could come out with something mediocre. Roderich was a much more elegant dancer, but Gilbert was able to lead Elizabeta with much more conviction and, more importantly, *without* tripping on his own shoes. Matthew and Katyusha too were progressing well and surpassed all of them both in grace and in complicity.

All things considered, Lovino had to admit that it was all his fault. Bella was having a hard time handling his mistakes and their choreography was suffering the consequences of his distracted mind.

Antonio was a professional and as such never gave the impression that he had something against Lovino. On the contrary, his smile was as bright as usual when he talked to Bella and Lovino about their steps, and his voice didn't betray the emotions he surely was feeling.

Lovino wished he could be like that, but the more he realized Antonio was pretending to be fine with him, the angrier he felt. His blood boiled in his veins, and at some point considered abandoning the whole thing and go back home.

Two months of practicing, an excessive amount of time listening to Bella telling him how hyped she was about the competition, was enough to dissuade Lovino of that idea. He had to be patient, grit his teeth and get on with it. He shouldn't be angry in the first place. He got what he wanted, right?

False.

“Will you finally do this right?” Bella asked, clearly fed up with him. Lovino stopped mentally debating with himself and looked up at Bella in question. She rolled her eyes upwards, Antonio’s strictness draining all her energy and will to look cheerful.

“What?” Lovino asked, annoyed.

“It’s the tenth time we’ve repeated the same steps and, frankly, I’m pretty sick and tired of it,” Bella snapped. She took a big step backwards and ran a hand through her blond hair. “Sorry,” she apologized immediately after, a guilty look flashing across her face. “I didn’t mean to snap.”

Lovino humphed, biting his tongue before he said something insulting. Fighting with Bella would get him nowhere. He wondered if he should tell her what was on his mind, but thought better of it. Feeling small under Bella’s scrutinizing stare, Lovino averted his gaze and fixed it on the CD player. Unfortunately, Antonio was right in his line of vision.

“We already talked about it,” Bella insisted, Lovino’s uncharacteristic silence putting her on edge. “Why can’t you remember?”

Lovino didn’t answer. What he did instead was lower his head and let out a deep sigh.

“I need some air,” he stated dryly and without another word he made a beeline to the door. Once he stepped out in the hallway, he continued walking until he found the bathroom. He stopped outside the door but instead of going inside he leaned against the wall and let out a sigh of relief. Soft classical music reached his ears and he listened to it intently, as if to fill his mind with something that wasn’t his own thoughts.

Suddenly he heard the telltale sounds of steps echoing in the hallway. Believing it was one of the school’s students, Lovino didn’t look up to see who it was. It was only when Antonio’s familiar scent reached his nostrils that he snapped his head upwards, eyes wide with shock.

“Are you okay?” Antonio asked, tilting his head in a honestly worried manner. Lovino pressed himself against the wall, his heart beating frantically in his chest. Unnerved by Lovino’s silence, Antonio took a step backwards and averted his gaze. “Is it me?” he asked, catching Lovino off guard.

“I don’t know.” The moment Lovino’s words left his mouth, Antonio’s face surprisingly softened. “Listen,” Lovino rushed to say before Antonio could. “Don’t worry about it, okay? I’ll get over it and I’ll try my best for Bella’s sake.”

“She is set on winning this,” Antonio said. “I overheard her talking about it with Lizzie.”

Unwillingly, Lovino snorted. He didn’t dare to look at Antonio’s face, although he was very aware the other was staring at him. Gulping down, Lovino scratched his arm, suddenly nervous.

“It’s not you,” he lied. “I’ve been thinking about my dad a fucking lot nowadays.”

The intake of breath from Antonio's part made Lovino realize how much he had missed talking with Antonio about trivialities. A mere two weeks have passed since their argument, but here Lovino was, dying to throw himself in Antonio's arms again. How weak of him.

"You know how there are people who you would do anything for?" Lovino asked. The awkward silence was oppressing him, and Antonio's detached stance was pushing him to the verge of tears.

Finally, Antonio spoke: "Yes, of course."

"Isabela?" Lovino asked, hating how the name rolled down his tongue. He looked up at Antonio and marveled at the melancholy expression on the other's face. He immediately changed subject: "Anyway, since he died, I tried my best to be like him and I've been wondering if--"

Lovino bit his tongue. Obviously, Antonio didn't care about that.

--if he's proud of you?"

Antonio's tentative question surprised him. "Hmmm..."

"Yeah, I know the feeling." Lovino blinked at him. Surprisingly calm, Antonio continued: "In the long run, though, I realized that what's more important is if *you* are proud of yourself."

A soft snort escaped Lovino. He looked down again, fought against the urge to do something that would betray his nervousness, like biting his nails.

"I'm not proud of many things I did in the past," Antonio said, voice uncharacteristically low. "But it's getting better now."

Lovino furrowed his brows, but he didn't speak. Face hot with emotion, Lovino tried his best to keep his attention on his shoes.

"That said," Antonio said, and Lovino was suddenly aware how much it pained him to utter the next words: "I am sorry for last time."

Feeling even more vulnerable under Antonio's gaze, Lovino shuffled his feet.

"Just so you know, I wasn't using you," Lovino said, "and I am not in love with Gilbert or anything."

"Okay." Antonio's expression was unreadable.

Lovino sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Perhaps we should go back inside."

"Yeah," Antonio breathed. Without waiting for Lovino, he turned around and walked away, back to the ballroom. Lovino waited a couple of minutes before he did the same.

When he returned, Bella too seemed to have gotten over her frustration. She welcomed him with open arms and they started dancing to the music like they were supposed to. Antonio

didn't look at them once, and Lovino managed to concentrate on his steps.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Thank my co-pilot if this chapter turned out better than when I first wrote it. Thank you TheCrystalFalls. <3

Chapter Eleven

The closer the day of the competition approached, the more Lovino regretted agreeing to this madness. Antonio kept telling them not to panic and kept smiling despite the murderous looks Lovino threw his way. Antonio said that it wasn't that big of a deal, that they were all newbies, that there was nothing to be afraid of, but to Lovino, those were the words of a professional dancer, who had nothing to lose and everything to gain if he strutted on the dancefloor.

Maybe Lovino would have believed him if Bella had not taken it personally, treating it as if there were an inner competition going on between her and Elizabeta. The girls were trying their best to outdo each other, driving both Lovino and Gilbert mad with their competitiveness, but right where everyone thought they were going to get at each other's throats because of it, Elizabeta and Bella burst out laughing and reverted to their practicing the basic steps as if nothing was the matter.

Lovino wondered if it was their way to relieve some tension. Competitions were stressful for everyone, but this was taking the concept of relaxing to a whole other level. It was the complete opposite, in fact. The pitiful glances Antonio sent him whenever Bella or Elizabeta were in one of those moods told Lovino that their teacher was very well aware of how stupid it all was. Did Antonio regret suggesting this at all?

"Of course not!" Antonio answered him. Lovino squinted his eyes at his bright smile and Antonio's conviction faltered slightly.

"I knew it."

Only Matthew and Katyusha seemed to sincerely enjoy dancing and if Lovino didn't know any better, they would have been ready to step on the dancefloor the very next day.

"Of course not," Katyusha told him, blushing madly when Lovino decided to outright ask her if they have been secretly practicing at home.

"Are you checking everybody else's dancing levels to see if you should ditch or not?" Bella asked one day, amusement gracing a smile on her lips. They just had finished their tango lesson and they were walking to the bus stop together. Lovino had no idea why Bella was

following him, since she didn't use the bus all that often. He guessed it was just something friends did; seeing each other off every evening just to have a moment alone together.

"Why are you so set on winning this?" Lovino asked instead. To answer a question with a question was his specialty, something that distracted his brother easily and usually helped him avoid serious conversations. Bella didn't seem put off by the sudden change of subject, but the expression on her face suddenly softened.

"I need a vacation," she said. "A \$2000 trip is not much but I'm in serious need of one."

Eyebrows furrowed, Lovino gave her a long, scrutinizing look, but nothing in her appearance hinted at some kind of underlying depression. Nevertheless, he needed to ask.

"Is everything okay?"

Bella took some time before answering. "Remember when I said I started tango because I broke up with my boyfriend?" When Lovino gave a tiny nod, she felt encouraged to keep on talking. "Well, I wasn't lying. We've been together for seven years, but there was always something off in our relationship. Some kind of codependence, maybe? I am actually glad to be finally single again, but no matter what my mind tells me, my heart still longs for him."

"So you want to get away for a bit?" Lovino asked. Bella made a vague gesture with her head.

"I want to stop thinking about him."

"Going on a trip is not going to help you much," Lovino said, without thinking. He immediately realized that bluntness should have been his last strategy when Bella's face contorted into a pained expression. "I mean..." he blushed. "It's that... codependency that makes you think you need to run away to be free."

"And what do you suggest I do?" Bella snapped, suddenly on the defensive.

"Win this competition and go places," Lovino said, "but don't expect it to get better? That takes time."

"Well, running away is something normal people do, right?"

"You tell me."

"Have you been running away too?"

Lovino took a big breath. His lungs filled with the coldness of the evening breeze. He had talked without seriously thinking over his words and he was suddenly aware that those were things his dad used to say whenever Feliciano and Lovino felt stuck in a certain situation. He had never learned his lesson, and yet he had been ready to push that very same suggestion to someone else. He was a hypocrite. That was something he needed to change, so he said:

"Yes."

Silence escorted them to the bus stop. Deep in thought, Bella sat down on the bench and looked upwards towards the starry sky. Lovino was suddenly not in the mood to go back home anymore and kicked a pebble, debating whether to wait for the bus or stroll around the neighborhood to see if there was something else he could do.

“It’s mentally tiring,” Bella said, breaking the silence.

“You’re telling me,” Lovino muttered and shove his hands in his pocket. His cheeks felt hot under Bella’s scrutinizing stare.

“I’m sorry I stressed you out with this,” she said, sounding sincere. “I probably took this competition too seriously.”

“I guess it’s what people like us do,” Lovino said, a bitter tone to his voice. “We put our everything into something to forget everything else.”

“Still, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

“I still want that \$2000 trip thought...”

“If we win, can we keep the money and skip the trip?”

Bella burst out laughing. “I don’t know if we are allowed to do that.”

“Goddamnit.”

Her laugh echoed in the darkness and the conversation drifted onto much lighter matters, until the bus came and Bella realized she was supposed to go in the opposite direction.

When Lovino returned home twenty minutes later, he caught Feliciano talking on the phone. He didn’t even look up from his nails at the sound of the door opening and closing with a soft click. Lovino paid no heed to what Feliciano was saying until he heard Ludwig’s name being spoken out loud. He lingered by the kitchen’s door and sent a worried glance behind his back to where Feliciano was curled in on the couch.

He had never seen Feliciano look so serious in his whole life. There was a glint of determination in his chestnut irises, although he stared at his nails as though he were afraid to look up and lock eyes, exposing the fear he never learned to hide from his brother. Lovino watched him talk –a nonstop rant- and wondered if Ludwig was really listening and if he was interjecting at all. Feliciano went on and on about something, fast as a bullet train, lips a thin line on his face.

It was in that moment that Lovino decided to turn on his heels and go back outside.

His legs took him back to the dance school –a waste of good transportation money, if he had to be honest- and up the stairs to his ballroom. An hour had passed since his class was over, so Lovino wasn’t sure if he came for nothing or not. He expected to find a dozen of strangers

looking up from his steps towards him in question, but all he encountered was a confused Spaniard, who was preparing his stuff to go home.

“Are you still here?”

They both uttered the same question in unison. They looked at each other for a long, baffled moment before they started laughing. Lovino had no idea why that brought tears to his eyes and he didn't even realize he was crying until Antonio hesitantly took a step towards him.

“Are you okay?” Antonio asked.

“Dandy.”

“Should we go drink something?”

Lovino could read the worry, the restrained concern in his voice, and finally realized how dependent they had become in between their nights together. It was difficult to let go, and Lovino didn't want to let go. That much was certain.

Put off by Lovino's prolonged silence, Antonio's lips curved in a slightly pissed off frown and Lovino fought back a snort.

“Yes, let's do that.”

Antonio's relief brightened up Lovino's night.

Lovino recognized the pub long after they found an empty table and ordered their drinks. He remembered how Matthew, Bella, Elizabeta and Roderich had been sitting there with him, how Katyusha had looked like she was ready to spring away and leave, how Lovino regretted joining tango class... how things had changed since that day.

Antonio's smile didn't betray his real emotions. It felt awkward to sit side by side like that, just because Lovino felt like seeing him again. The music in the pub was loud and Lovino had to raise his voice to answer Antonio's silent question.

“I don't know why I fucking came back.”

Antonio's snort was not unexpected. Now Lovino knew him well enough to see he wasn't just happy-go-lucky, that he could be snarky, that he could lose his patience with a flick of his fingers. Antonio had many layers, just as Lovino did, and there was so much more to him than just a sexy tango teacher. Hah. Lovino laughed at the thought, and Antonio caught a glimpse of his amusement on his face.

“What's so funny?” Anger was ready to turn this weird date into a fight, and Lovino didn't want to allow Antonio get upset with him again.

“Nothing,” Lovino said. “I just...” He fidgeted. His heart started beating faster. Cheeks red, he wrapped his fingers around his wine glass to have something to do. “Did you and Isabela use to date?”

The question slapped Antonio across the face. The shock lasted but a moment, but long enough to make Lovino regret his decision to skip politeness and go straight to the point. Then suddenly, Antonio was laughing.

“No,” he said, and his eyes crinkled up in honest amusement. “We were friends?”

“Why the question mark?” Lovino demanded.

“Because I think it’s funny you asked.”

“That’s not a real answer, dipshit.”

Antonio snickered and took a sip of his drink. Lovino started losing his patience, and insisted, “I am not jealous, mind you.”

“I didn’t think you were,” Antonio said. “Why should you be? It isn’t like that one time you thought I was flirting with your brother.”

“You were, you fucking pervert,” Lovino said, frowning. Antonio laughed again. “Oh, forget I even asked.”

“She’s like my sister,” Antonio said.

“I heard that already.”

“Then what do you want me to say?” Antonio asked. Lovino scratched the surface of the wooden table between them, deep in thought. “You wanna know more about me, now?”

The sarcasm rubbed Lovino off the wrong way. Still, he decided not to let it get to him. Tried not to, anyway, and failed. “Fuck you.”

His conscience screamed at him to stop being such an asshole. Lovino rolled his eyes to the ceiling. The music got suddenly quieter; some of the patrons had asked to tone it down.

“I still barely know anything about you,” Lovino said. “You’re so... evasive.”

“Not really.” Antonio smirked. “You just never bothered to ask me anything.”

“Ouch.” He didn’t want to admit that he hadn’t asked any questions out of fear for what those responses would be.

“It’s the truth.” When Lovino did nothing but hum at that, Antonio continued: “You want to know more about me?”

“I don’t know why you think I care.”

“You must have come back for something.”

“Don’t rub it in.”

“What do you want to know?” Antonio asked. The sincerity in his voice surprised Lovino immensely, and he looked up at Antonio’s face. The look the other gave him made his heart do a flip in his chest. They were so not over. Lovino hated it.

He wanted Antonio to tell him everything, to start from the beginning, but his tongue didn’t follow his mind’s orders. So he just stared and imprinted Antonio’s eyes into his memory.

“If we had met ten years ago, you would have hated my guts,” Antonio said.

“I hate your guts right now.”

Antonio laughed. “Even more, then.”

Lovino internally scolded himself for lying yet again out of discomfort, and hastily attempted to fix it. “I don’t hate your guts.”

“Oh?” Antonio’s eyebrows raised to his hairline and Lovino looked down at his glass again. When Lovino made no sign to talk, Antonio continued: “Anyway, you would have. I would have hated myself too.”

“What the fuck did you do?” Lovino’s voice shook and he took a sip to clear his throat.

“I fought for dominance.”

The words relieved Lovino from the tension in his shoulders and he barked out an honest laugh. He dared to look at Antonio again and this time he didn’t avert his gaze elsewhere. “What are you, a dog?”

“An alpha male.”

“How typical of a Spanish macho man.”

“Doesn’t it suit me?”

“You are as menacing as a flower,” Lovino said, but he knew he didn’t mean it. When Antonio got angry at him, Lovino had been scared shitless, and he didn’t want to see that ever again.

“People didn’t think like you back then,” Antonio said.

“At least people feared you once,” Lovino said. “I’ve always been regarded as this useless good-for-nothing by everyone. Their opinion on me hasn’t changed since.”

“I’m sure your dad didn’t think that.”

“I don’t know,” Lovino said. “Never asked.”

Silence fell on them for the next couple of minutes before Antonio decided to speak again: “Isabela was the only one who knew how to calm me down.”

“Hmmm...” Lovino tried feigning disinterest, but was pretty sure it wasn’t working.

“You know, I grew up poor,” Antonio said. “I was jealous of the people who had everything ready at their doorstep. Isabela saw how ambitious I was and took me under her wings. She was powerful, being the daughter of a very influential family, and gave me free reign to do as I pleased. I was a bully, Lovino, and she was proud of me for being able to get whatever I wanted without breaking a sweat.”

“Were you in a gang or something?”

“No, nothing like that,” Antonio said, letting out a soft, although bitter, laugh. “Isabela’s parents were landowners. I was broke when I met her and I started working for them to make a living.”

“What did you do?”

“I was a real estate agent, basically. I had no license for it but they didn’t really care about those kinds of technicalities. As long as I got the job done, it didn’t make a difference *how* I carried it out. I demanded payment, made contracts, sold land to richer people to really high prices, much more than what those lands were worth, I found new places to construct on, dealt with the construction managers and spread my influence all over the country.... everything a real estate agent does and more.”

Lovino stared at him in awe. “You don’t seem like that kind of man.”

“I became one, thanks to Isabela.” Antonio’s bittersweet smile was like a pang to Lovino’s heart. He ran his fingers through his hair, wondering what he should ask next, when it suddenly hit him, how Antonio was dancing around the details. He noticed the way Antonio averted his gaze and how he tapped his nails against the glass. Small signs of nervousness that Lovino immediately picked up on because he recognized those same signals in himself.

“There is a but coming somewhere, isn’t there?” It was phrased like a question but came out like a statement. Antonio made a vague gesture with his hands.

“*But* I wasn’t exactly.... righteous about it. That’s why they liked me, because my methods gave them faster results. I constantly lied to people, I binded them into unethical contracts, I talked people into doing what I pleased, I could kick poor families out of their houses with a flick of my fingers. My friends back then were not saints, if you understand what I mean. Thanks to them I extinguished my competitors. I became too powerful for anyone to resist me.”

“I can’t believe you—”

“Lovino,” Antonio interrupted him, suddenly angry. “I don’t want to hear you judging me.”

“I won’t.”

For a moment the surprise gave Antonio’s face a funny expression, but Lovino kept his eyes on him, as if daring to contradict him. He wasn’t in the mood to laugh, and Antonio seemed

to like the determination in his eyes. Perhaps that was the reason why Antonio didn't get angry when Lovino said, "I can't believe you could do something like that."

"I was born a bully, so it was like second nature to me," Antonio explained. "That's what I used to be as a kid. I wasn't very kind to my peers and I've always gotten into fights. That was why one day I ran into my tango teacher's class, to avoid a fistfight."

"I think you told me that."

"He was everything Isabela wasn't." Lovino didn't ask him to explain, so Antonio continued: "He helped me out a lot, and he was still by my side after I decided to work for Isabela. Then Isabela's parents died and business started to falter."

"Why was that?" Lovino asked.

"I was sick and tired of people looking at me with fear," Antonio answered. "I wasn't proud of myself at all, Lovi, and that showed in the way I handled work. Soon enough all my friends turned their backs on me. I had more enemies than friends, to be honest. It was one against one hundred and I knew that it was only a matter of time before I antagonized the wrong man."

"You felt threatened?"

"Yes, and without Isabela's parents, I was vulnerable. And when she fell ill..."

"You decided to move out?"

"She wanted me to. That kind of life was exhausting and she realized I needed a new start. She helped me get my papers approved and all of that boring stuff. I didn't want to leave her, but..."

"Isabela was bossy?" Lovino prodded. Antonio nodded but didn't dare to say his thoughts out loud. "You are loyal to her."

"Loyal?" Antonio tilted his head to his side. Lovino blushed.

"I don't know why I said that."

"I'm loyal to those I love," Antonio said. Lovino lowered his head. This was a sentence he would have loved to tease Antonio for, but he didn't find the strength to.

"So you love her?"

"Maybe I loved myself more. That's what my tango teacher told me and that helped me realize how much I truly wanted to leave. It was not because Isabela said so. I wanted to be my own man." Lovino took a deep breath. Here it was: the realization Gilbert had been right. Antonio's next words took Lovino by surprise. "But it's different now."

"Different how?"

“Lovino,” Antonio said. “Doing everything for your own gain is not as fulfilling as they make it out to be.”

“Since when did you get so wise?” Lovino teased him.

“Since I met you.”

Lovino didn’t know what else to say to that.

The rest of the evening continued well, all things considered. Lovino and Antonio stopped talking about the past and moved on to lighter subjects. Gilbert and Elizabeta’s strange relationship came up more than once.

“I think Gilbert is up for a threesome,” Antonio said, laughing, and gulping down his third glass of wine. “He kinda likes this Roderich dude, he just has to get the other two behind it.”

“That is never going to happen,” Lovino stated, as though him saying so would somehow prevent the inevitable.

Perhaps it was as horror stories told: name the monster thrice, and he is bound to come to you. That was what happened. At the third time Antonio said Gilbert’s name, Gilbert called him on the cellphone.

They were both drunk, and they both couldn’t sit up properly, so Gilbert immediately suggested he come by car to pick them up.

“He pretends to be this almighty ostrich,” Lovino said, pressing against Antonio’s shoulder for support as they made their way outside the pub. “But he’s a mother hen.”

“Why an ostrich?” Antonio asked.

“He’s ugly as fuck.”

Antonio laughed. An arm slid around Lovino’s waist and remained there. Lovino didn’t mind.

It was like this that Gilbert found them. He shot them both worried looks as they waddled into the backseat.

“You okay, over there?” Gilbert asked, staring at their reflection in the rearview mirror. Lovino hummed, snuggling closer Antonio, while the other looked outside the window, pondering something deeply.

“Gilbert, you were wrong,” Lovino slurred, closing his eyes.

Gilbert started the car and drove into the traffic before he replied, “I’m never wrong.”

“This time you were,” Lovino said, earning an arched eyebrow from both Antonio and Gilbert’s part. “Antonio is not loyal only to himself.”

“You said what now?” Antonio snapped, gaze hazy with alcohol.

“I think I got it now,” Lovino said, ignoring them both. “I think he loves me.”

Gilbert shared a stunned glance with Antonio, clicking his tongue when he realized that Lovino had fallen asleep. In his drunken stupor, Antonio raised a hand and caressed Lovino’s hair.

“I thought you two weren’t seeing each other anymore outside of tango class,” Gilbert said.

“Would you believe me if I told you I didn’t do anything this time?”

Gilbert shook his head and continued driving. Fortunately he had Lovino’s address from Ludwig and, parking in front of the Vargas’ door, he ordered Antonio to stay put and took Lovino out of the car on his own.

“Boy, is he heavy,” he muttered, carrying him bridal style down the driveway. The lights inside the house were switched on, and Feliciano must have been checking out from the window, because he immediately opened the door when Gilbert tried to press the doorbell with his nose.

“What happened?” Feliciano asked, escorting Gilbert to the living room.

“I got no clue,” Gilbert said and dropped Lovino’s sleeping body on the couch like a sack of potatoes. His lack of sensitivity went unnoticed: Lovino kept snoring.

“I think I heard him come in before, but when I turned around, he wasn’t home anymore.”

“Ask him in the morning,” Gilbert said and then patted Feliciano on the back. “Oh, and I heard the news from my dear little brother! Congratulations!” He exclaimed, grinning.

Feliciano beamed, but then turned serious again, when he shot a glance at Lovino.

“Is he going to take it well?”

“If he doesn’t, he’ll come around soon enough.”

Gilbert bid him goodnight and returned to his car to bring his friend back home. By the time he sat down in the driver’s seat, Antonio had laid down on the backseat and was now snoring soundly.

“Mediterraneans,” Gilbert muttered as he drove into the night. “I swear to God.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

A MILLION thanks to TheCrystalFalls!! <3<3<3

This is a chapter where nothing happens, but we are moving forwards at the same time.
:D Enjoy, and as always, feedback is highly appreciated!

Chapter Twelve

Lovino woke up with a massive headache and an unquenchable thirst. He was probably being overdramatic, but if asked, he would swear on everything he held dear that he was going to die from dehydration if he didn't have a glass of water in the next ten seconds.

It was a lovely Saturday morning; Lovino could even hear the birds chirping outside his slightly open window. A soft breeze slipped through the curtains, dancing over the sunshine, along with the fine flecks of dust that became visible only when the light hit them. Lovino thought it was beautiful. He didn't remember to have enjoyed mornings like he did at that moment... and he sure as hell didn't remember opening the damn thing. He supposed it was his brother's doing, and that he was lurking around, waiting for him to wake up.

He was the answer to all of his problems. If Feliciano loved him as much as he claimed to, he should be up and willing to bring him a whole can of water, wouldn't he? Lovino called him once but all he received in response was unnerving silence. Clearing his dry throat, Lovino cursed the bird's cheerful song for giving him a headache and called his brother again, this time louder. Nothing. Three failed attempts later, Lovino knew he was all alone at home.

He reached over to his cellphone, only to discover he had not switched it off at all the previous night. Four unanswered calls flashed on his display, and Lovino wondered how he managed to sleep through that annoying song he decided to set as a ringtone. The first one was at 8:14 from Gilbert, one was from Feliciano, at 11:12, and the last two were from no other than Antonio, one at 12:15, the other not long after. Finally, Lovino's eyes jumped towards the time flashing on the upper right of his screen. It wasn't morning at all, his phone told him, it was already past noon.

As if on cue, Lovino's stomach gurgled. He debated whether to slip out of bed or call his brother back. He did neither. His fingers moved on their own accord, dialing Antonio's number against all logic. He was still too out of it to hang up before it was too late.

"Hey, Lovi!"

There was a tinge of worry in Antonio's otherwise cheerful voice. Lovino readjusted his position in bed so that he could lie comfortably down and not tire his hand as he pressed the phone against the ear.

"Hi."

"Did you just wake up?" The concern was immediately gone as soon as Lovino replied, replaced by sheer amusement. Lovino closed his eyes, picturing Antonio next to him as he said:

"That is none of your business."

Antonio's laugh was genuine, Lovino's heart skipped a beat at the sound. He missed it: he missed him.

"I take that as a yes?" The question almost but not quite put a smile on Lovino's lips. He opened his eyes again, focusing on an old stain on his curtain.

"Did you bring me back home?" Lovino asked. "I don't remember shit from last night."

"Gilbert did," Antonio answered. Lovino heard the albino shouting something, followed by the click of a door closing. "He said he tried to call you."

"Does he know where my brother is?"

"I'll ask him--"

"No!" Lovino exclaimed, catching them both off-guard. "No," he repeated, calmer. "I don't care. What- hmm... how are you? My head feels like a hot air balloon. "

"I'm used to hangovers," Antonio said. "I hardly feel anything the day after. Plus, I drank much less than you." A bubble of laughter escaped his throat, and Lovino's insult died on his lips. He caught himself smiling instead. "Francis says eating ginger helps. Have you drunk something? Water, I mean."

"Ugh, I hate ginger," Lovino said. "And no. I'm not in the fucking mood to get out of this bed. I'm going to die here, in my comforter."

"Do you want me to come over?"

Lovino should say no. "...Yes."

"Are you going to open the door or should I climb through the window?"

"I'd like to see you struggle to come in."

"Do you think your neighbors would call the police if I try?"

Lovino snorted before realizing Antonio was not joking. He could hear the concerned tone in his voice. "I'll open the door."

A sigh of relief. "I'll be there in ten."

"Yeah, yeah." Lovino hung up. Taking a deep breath in, he abandoned his phone on the bedside table and stretched.

He wrapped himself in his sheets and stared at the slice of blue sky he could discern through the curtains. A soft breeze caressed his exposed cheek, and Lovino pulled the covers over his head. Now that he knew Antonio was coming over, Lovino was completely awake and couldn't go back to sleep so easily. He slid out of his bed, hissed when his warm feet found cold, solid ground and pushed himself in a standing position. He shuffled his way to his wardrobe and picked some clothes, letting the sheet slid over his shoulders to the floor. He took his sweet time with every step, resulting in him climbing down the stairs to the kitchen more than half an hour later. He grabbed a bottled water and chugged it down, spitting some of its contents in surprise when the door rang twice. He glanced down at his wrinkled clothes and tried to straighten out his shirt before he made to welcome Antonio in.

"You look terrible," Antonio said when Lovino beckoned him inside. "In a good way!" He rushed to say when Lovino shot him a murderous look.

"Thank you, dickhead. And you look like an ass as always... *in a good way*, of course." Lovino didn't bother to look behind him to see if Antonio was following him. He heard his steps on the tiled floor—he swore he could recognize them everywhere—and went back to the kitchen. Then, perhaps a little too dramatically, he plopped down on a chair and hid his head in his arms.

"I'm gonna die."

"Francis gave me some ibuprofen."

Arching his eyebrow in surprise, Lovino lifted his head and squinted his eyes at the small packet Antonio had put on the table right in front of his nose.

"How do I know it actually is ibuprofen?" Lovino asked, flickering his gaze back to Antonio. His tango teacher laughed, completely missing the teasing smile on Lovino's lips, and pulled a chair towards him. The corner of his eyes crinkled up with amusement.

"He bought it this morning," Antonio said. Lovino wasn't thinking about the pills anymore. Throat suddenly dry, he let his eyes wander over Antonio's features, marveling at how gorgeous he looked despite the slight hangover he was surely going through. Lovino wished he could be just as stunning as him. He must have stared for a while because a concerned expression flashed across Antonio's face.

"Is there something on my face?" Antonio asked, lifting a hand towards his nose. Lovino felt his cheeks heat up from embarrassment and violently shook his head no. The veins in his forehead throbbed in protest. Hissing from pain, Lovino hid his face behind his hands. "That bad?" Antonio asked. Lovino felt Antonio's fingers caress his knuckles and he peeked at Antonio through the gap between his index and middle finger.

Something in the way Antonio looked at him made Lovino lower his arms back on his lap. They stared at each other for a while, still and comfortable in each other's presence. Lovino was painfully aware of the rise and fall of Antonio's chest and wondered if he would be able to sense Antonio's heartbeat if he watched him closely enough. Antonio's eyes were fixed on him, pupils dilated, his green irises mesmerizing.

Suddenly in dire need to fill the silence with something, Lovino gulped and asked: "Should we eat something?" His voice came out hoarser than he intended and he cleared his throat from embarrassment.

Antonio tilted his head in question, the line of his exposed throat sending Lovino's mind into overdrive, and the younger man grabbed the ibuprofen to have something to do with his hands. Shaking, he freed a pill from his plastic cage and gulped it down dry, almost causing himself to choke in the process. Alarmed, Antonio shot up from his seat and towards the sink to get him a glass of tap water. Lovino accepted it gladly, blushing when Antonio knelt next to his chair to check on him. "I'm okay..." he mumbled. "I'm fine. Stop looking like a dumbass. Should we eat? Have you eaten?"

"Yes, I mean, yes to the first question. I haven't eaten yet. Are you hungry?"

Lovino managed to nod his head once, furrowing his eyebrows when Antonio's lifted a hand and brushed a strand of hair away from Lovino's eyes.

"Breakfast?" Antonio asked.

"I want something more nourishing than toast," Lovino said. He made to stand up but Antonio gently pushed him back on his seat. The younger man's followed him as Antonio pulled himself back up and moved towards the over, rolling up his sleeves.

"Do want me to cook something? I can make just about anything." The naïve smile was back on his lips. Lovino was almost tempted to make fun of him for that, sure that there would be no other chance after this to boast about his own achievements in the kitchen. Then again, Lovino found the movement of Antonio's shoulders as he paced around the kitchen extremely alluring. Distracting Antonio from his purpose would be a waste of a good show, so he said nothing.

"I see you have a lot of pasta," Antonio said, glancing forth and back from the pasta filled cupboard to Lovino's sheepish face. "Should I make that?"

"No," Lovino said surprising himself. "Why... w-why don't you make something you are good at instead?"

The look Antonio threw his way sent shivers down Lovino's spine. He immediately cast his eyes down. Eye contact seemed to be the last thing he should do at that moment, lest he wanted his heart to burst out of his chest and spill blood all over the kitchen table.

"Okay!"

Antonio's enthusiastic cry put a smile on Lovino's mouth. His reaction to Antonio's presence was different than usual. His guts twisted in pleasure. It was neither lust nor arousal, just the plain contentment of being taken care of.

"Okay!" Antonio repeated, clapping his hands once, and walked back to the fridge. What he found was enough to make an improvised version of the paella, he announced after rummaging through its contents. Lovino waved his hand nonchalantly, granting him permission to do as he pleased.

Of course, Antonio didn't miss the chance to whine about how Lovino would not be able to eat the real dish, as the Vargas lacked half of the ingredients Antonio needed. Lovino reassured him there would be a next time.

"Alright then." At those two words, Lovino's heart skipped a beat.

"Shall I help?"

"Stay where you are?" Antonio gave him a sly smile with the barest hint of an apology. "You're still getting over a hangover."

Lovino asked him out of politeness, anyway. He preferred watching Antonio moving around the Vargas' kitchen as he owned the place. It was something he did, Lovino realized at that moment. Antonio could never pass unnoticed when he stepped into a room. Contrary to Gilbert, who made himself known by announcing himself to the crowd, Antonio was subtle with it. He could light up a room with his mere presence, showing to everyone, with unexpected grace, that he was there for a reason, he was important. Antonio was completely unaware of the way he moved, but Lovino could see he was doing it constantly. He would bet, had there it been a crowd watching them, that Antonio would have everybody's undivided attention, and not just because he was the one moving.

"Is that something you learned to do when you were younger?" Lovino wanted to ask but refrained from saying so. He wasn't in the mood to bring up the past. For now, he was content watching him work.

The air filled with the scent of wine, chopped onions, and tomatoes. The frying pan sizzled, a sound that made both their stomach groan from hunger. Their gazes met instantly and the two burst out laughing. Finally, Lovino decided to stand up and set the table.

"Go easy with that parsley," Lovino reproached him. "I'm not in the mood to go grocery shopping any soon."

"It's just a handful."

"Can you do without?"

"Of course not. Does pizza come without mozzarella?"

"Don't be a smartass."

It was easy to fall into that domestic atmosphere. To say Lovino loved it would be an understatement, and Antonio made sure, with his silly jokes, to make him love it even more. Sitting one in front of the other, the two ate and shared wine, drinking straight from the bottle, talking about everything and nothing, as if they had known each other for years.

Looking at the curve of Antonio's jaw, the way his nostrils flared when Lovino teased him about the last soccer game against the Barcelona, Lovino had to admit it *did* feel like years. Some may say he just knew him in the biblical sense, but Lovino felt like he was aware of every part of the other's soul, more intimately than ever.

"...it's all about being one with the music, you know?" Antonio was saying, pushing his empty plate away from him. "But some people cannot for the life of them follow the rhythm. It's so simple and yet--oh, that's a great idea! I should put some music on and I'll show you!"

"Antonio," Lovino said, rolling his eyes to the ceiling as the other shot up from his seat to the small radio standing right next to the microwave. "You already teach me tango. You don't need to show me anything!"

"No, I do!" Antonio exclaimed, fumbling with the buttons of the old radio, one of Lovino's dad's most precious belongings. The quaint thing buzzed and went static until Antonio turned a knob and it screamed murder. Lovino slapped his hands over his ears and joined him, cursing loudly as he fixed the radio.

"It was my dad's, this damn thing," Lovino said. "He used to listen to it every fucking morning. There was a radio program that came on at seven sharp. It made him laugh so hard, waking us up before the alarm clock did. I think he did it on purpose to torment us. Feliciano always said he much preferred to be woken up by his laughter than by an annoying melody on his phone. There!" Lovino exclaimed with a satisfied grin. He turned to look at Antonio and froze. Something in the other's eyes made him painfully self-conscious and he blushed. "What?"

"Nothing," Antonio said, shooting a quick glance at the radio. "What do you think of this song?"

"It's stupid" was Lovino's immediate reply. "If you are in the corner watching someone else kiss her, you aren't going to stand there singing about it, are you? It's stupid."

"I like it," Antonio said with a soft smile. "And I think it's exactly what I need right now."

"Antonio, this song has no fucking rhythm," Lovino said gesturing over the radio, annoyed. "It's... a ballad? What can you do with this that's not swaying side to side like an absolute idiot?"

Antonio stretched his hand to him. "Dance with me and I'll show you."

Lovino froze. "What did you say?"

The expression on Antonio's face softened: "Dance with me."

Lovino stared at the hand for a while, his eyebrows furrowed in contemplation. He suddenly remembered Roderich's words, a blurry memory in his mind's eyes, and tentatively lifted his hand. When their fingers intertwined, Lovino's stomach turned into knots.

Softly, hesitantly, Antonio pulled him towards his chest. Lovino looked up and let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding when Antonio's forehead pressed against him. Lovino was tempted to take the lead but decided to just follow Antonio's moves instead. He had watched Bella enough to know what he should do. It was difficult to go awry from the usual pattern –he's always been the lead with her- but he got used to it easily since it was like learning a new dance, different enough he wouldn't confuse the steps.

Feeling Antonio's forehead on his helped him focus.

"You see?" Lovino asked, surprised by the amusement in his own voice. Antonio wrapped his arms around his waist and Lovino needed a few moments to remember what he wanted to ask. "We are swaying side to side like two idiots."

Antonio's snort was a soft breeze on his cheek. "Are we?"

"This is not a dance."

"It is. It's called rumba."

"Rumba?" Lovino laughed. "Nice try."

The tilt of Antonio's head to the side drove Lovino crazy. He moved closer, following Antonio's movements at the same time. Antonio's hand slid out the embrace and found Lovino one. His thumb started drawing soothing circles on Lovino's knuckles. Lovino heard Antonio gulp and his eyes immediately found the other's lips.

"It's a ballroom dance..." Antonio said, voice husky. Lovino's breath quickened. "Just a ballroom dance."

"A slow rhythm."

"Yeah."

Lovino let his gaze wander up from Antonio's lips to the other's eyes that were looking at him with interest. The radio moved on to something more upbeat and Lovino stopped moving.

"Do you still have a headache?" Antonio asked.

"Not really."

The front door clicked open and Lovino took his time from disentangling himself from Antonio's embrace. They were still linked by the hand when Feliciano appeared in the kitchen.

"What's this scent?" Feliciano asked and froze mid-step when he noticed Antonio. "Oh, hi!"

Antonio let go of Lovino's hand. "Hey."

Feliciano's attention was immediately drawn to Lovino, who couldn't stop staring at Antonio's features. "So you are up? I tried to call you!"

"Hmmm... hangover." Lovino willed himself to look at Feliciano and unconsciously smiled. "Where have you been?"

Lovino's good mood took Feliciano completely by surprise, his eyes going wide as he stared at his brother. Lovino didn't notice.

"Have you eaten? There's still some paella left," Lovino said.

"I think I should go," Antonio said, voice tinged with regret. "I have a class tonight to prepare for."

"Oh, okay. See you... tomorrow?" Lovino lifted his head up towards him.

"See you tomorrow." Antonio smiled brightly at him, and Lovino's lips curved upwards as well. The older man grabbed his coat hanging from the kitchen's chair and made his way to the door. Lovino and Feliciano followed him.

"Thank you for taking care of my brother!" Feliciano exclaimed, but neither of them heard him.

Antonio lingered by the door, putting his coat on incredibly slowly. Lovino tilted his head to the side and helped him out, one sleeve at a time.

"Have fun in class," Lovino teased him, making Antonio laugh softly.

"Yeah..." He leaned down, stopping just a breath away from Lovino's lips. Then, as if remembering something, he stepped away and opened the door with a shaky hand.

"Bye, Lovi."

"Bye."

Antonio flashed him a last smile before closing the door behind him. Amused, Lovino shook his head and turned around to climb up the stairs to his room, when he suddenly remembered he had an audience. Feliciano's eyebrows were so far up his forehead they almost became one with his hairline.

"What was that?"

"What was what?" Lovino asked and tried to walk around him. "Where have you been all day, by the way?"

"With..." Feliciano gulped down nervously. "With Ludwig."

"Oh." That didn't sound good.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” Feliciano said. Lovino glanced over to the closed door and let out a sigh.

“What about?” he asked, although he wasn’t really interested in what Feliciano had to say. Feliciano gulped dramatically again and shuffled his feet.

“I decided to accept his proposal.”

“Proposal?” Lovino asked, not really understanding what Feliciano was getting at. “Oh, great, that’s great.”

His brother tilted his head. “Do you really agree with that?”

“Whatever makes you happy,” Lovino said with a smile, and humming a song under his breath, he climbed up the stairs, back to his room. Feliciano watched him go and scratched his head in confusion.

“What on earth was that?”

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Once again, please give a round of applause to TheCrystalFalls for being such a talented editor and such a supportive friend! I wouldn't have ever written this fic if it weren't for her. Thank you, my friend. <3 And thank you, my dear reader, for enjoying this story and loving it to its very end. <3<3

Chapter Thirteen

It was the day before the tango competition and Lovino could not stop thinking about it. While he typed furiously on his computer, his feet moved under the desk on their own accord, following a rhythm only Lovino could hear. *Left, right, tap tap tap*. Truth be told, Lovino was not even aware he was doing it. The clicking of his fingers against the keyboard held a special tune to it, which could even resemble a tango rhythm if someone was creative enough. For a moment Lovino thought he was really playing tango on piano. He was obsessed, just as Bella had been in the beginning of this competition craze. Oh, how the tables have turned. The closer the day of the competition, the calmer Bella seemed to be, while he, the one who had stated over and over again how he didn't give a flying fuck about it, was now shaking with anticipation.

Could it be that Antonio had something to do with it? The thought crossed his mind and stayed there. Once upon a time he would have pushed such thoughts away but now Lovino did nothing of the sort. It was comforting to know he was doing this for someone who cared; it warmed him from the inside out. Welcoming the picture of Antonio in his mind, his lips stretched upwards into a tender smile. He wanted to wipe it off his face, but at the same time it felt good. He had forgotten how it felt to be truly happy.

"Hah! In a good mood, I see, my sweet brother-in-law!"

And just like that, Lovino was pulled back on Earth. His fingers and the tips of his toes stopped tapping, and he slowly moved towards the source of the voice, clicking his tongue when his eyes met Gilbert's amused ones.

"I thought you were never going to call me that again," Lovino said, massaging his temples when Gilbert dropped down on the empty chair next to his. Realizing he looked like Ludwig when he did that, Lovino slowly lowered his hands to his lap.

At Lovino's words, confusion flashed across Gilbert's face but it was gone before Lovino could ask him about it.

"So are we going to pretend it's not happening?"

It was Lovino's turn to be confused. He furrowed his eyebrows at Gilbert's smirk and asked, suspicious: "What's happening?"

"Fine!" Gilbert shot his hands up in the air and chuckled. "Let's not talk about this until the wedding bells start ringing."

"What wedding bells?" Lovino asked but then, thinking better of it, turned his attention back to the computer and shooed Gilbert away. "You know what? I don't care. If you are going to get married, don't ask me to be your best man."

"*Apropos* best men.... did Feliciano ask you yet?" Gilbert asked, leaning closer and staring at him with wide, curious red eyes. Slamming his hands on Gilbert's face, Lovino pushed him away from his personal space and enjoyed it immensely when the albino screeched in surprise.

"I don't know what you are talking about," Lovino said brusquely. "Now go away. I am working, as you see."

"I saw you dancing under the table," Gilbert said instead, letting out a bark of laughter when Lovino's feet froze on the spot. "Don't worry. I won't tell anybody."

"Will you get the fuck out??"

"Fiiiine! Be that way." Faking disappointment, Gilbert sniffed and threw his head back haughtily, breaking character as soon as Lovino snorted in amusement.

"Are you for real?"

"You offended my honor."

"Bitch, when? And stop that! You look like Roderich and it's creepy."

Gilbert burst out laughing and rolled his office chair closer to Lovino's, clearly having learned nothing from the last time he came over. "I do, don't I?" He asked, sounding proud of himself. "He's so easy to imitate. As if he travelled to the future straight from the 18th century. You just need to picture those guys, with their frilly dresses and fake moles on their noses, and raise your pinky like this!" he exclaimed, showing Lovino what he meant. The Italian stared at the pointed finger and then let his eyes wander up Gilbert's face, disbelieving. "Funny guy. Stingy as fuck," Gilbert continued, unaware of Lovino's confusion.

"If I didn't know any better, I would almost say you like him."

Gilbert shrugged. "Between you and me," he said, scratching his nose as if embarrassed of the next words he wanted to utter, "the more I get to know him, the less I wonder why Lizzie married him."

At that Gilbert clapped his hands together as if he had no idea what to do with them. To say Lovino was shocked would be an understatement and he must have looked pretty appalled, judging by the suddenly insecure expression on Gilbert's face. Low-self-confidence surely didn't suit the albino at all.

“Seriously?” Lovino was at a loss for words and Gilbert sniffed loudly, letting out a chuckle that was supposed to sound nonchalant. “Like... *seriously*?”

Gilbert pretended not to hear him. Plastering a huge grin on his face, he slapped Lovino hard on the back and asked, completely out of the blue: “So, you and Antonio, huh?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“If Bella weren’t your partner, Antonio would have danced with you in the competition!” Gilbert exclaimed, his rough voice getting suddenly a note higher. “The idea excites him so much! He can’t really wait to put his hands on your--!”

“What??” Lovino screeched.

“Antonio cannot stop talking about the competition, and I think Ludwig too won’t mind the show.”

It took Lovino a good couple of minutes to let that information sink in.

“Tell me he didn’t invite him!” Lovino’s eyes became wide as saucers when Gilbert coughed behind his clenched fist. “He didn’t!” Gilbert stood up. “Don’t let him come!” Lovino pleaded, “For the love of God, don’t you fucking dare-!”

“Ludwig will bring his camera!” Gilbert winked at him and dashed out of Lovino’s cubicle before the younger man could throw his computer at him.

Antonio’s enthusiasm was palpable. The whole ballroom reeked of it, injecting confidence in his otherwise nerve wrecked students. They started practicing when they were still thinking of dropping out, but by the end of the lesson everybody looked ready to go, as if they were going to perform right then and there and not the day after in front of hundreds of strangers. Everybody was happy except for one. By the end of the day, Lovino’s enthusiasm from that morning had vanished in a puff of white smoke.

He tried his best to keep up with Bella throughout the lesson, but feeling everybody’s eyes on him, he couldn’t really focus on his steps. Everybody seemed better than him, much more talented. He lacked in rhythm and buoyancy, while everybody else looked perfectly comfortable playing the role they were given.

Bella didn’t seem to notice, too concentrated on keeping her balance during the most difficult turns to mind her partner, but a glance towards Antonio made Lovino realize that Antonio had not missed the sudden tension in his shoulders. Nevertheless, he didn’t comment on it and just guided Lovino’s movements with his hands. His lingering touch and the softness of his caresses were all Lovino needed to stop thinking about the competition and focus on Bella instead. Although he really wasn’t saying anything, Lovino could practically hear Antonio’s words of encouragement in his head. He drew strength from it and for the most part it worked. He thought he should thank him for being so understanding and feeling the

need to talk with Antonio face to face, he glanced at the clock and hoped the hour would go by fast.

When the lesson was over, Lovino was the last one to leave the room. He lagged behind and watched Antonio putting his stuff away in his old backpack. He leant against the doorframe and crossed his arms, enjoying the view of Antonio's nape peeking out his black shirt.

"Lovino!" Lizzie called him from the hallway. "Are you taking the bus with us or not?"

"Sssh! He's busy!" Gilbert's voice suddenly covered hers and Lovino shot an annoyed glance at the two when the pair started whispering madly to each other. "Have fun, you two!" Gilbert shouted at them, grabbing Lizzie's hand and dragging her away downstairs.

"Aren't you going?" Antonio asked, balancing his backpack on his shoulder, and approached Lovino with careful steps.

The familiar scent of his sweat filled his nostrils and Lovino's heart sped up. He cursed himself for being so weak, but forgot about his shameful reaction a moment later, blurting out the first thing that came to mind.

"I want to quit," Lovino decided to say, looking up at Antonio and hoping to sound as self-assured as he wanted to be. A drop of sweat made its way down Antonio's temple down to his jaw and Lovino purposely stared at it, hoping to avoid the tender look Antonio was throwing his way. The softness in his smile was sure to be the end of him.

"I know you don't mean that."

Damn.

"I suck."

"You know that's not true, Lovi."

"I can't dance, it's pointless."

"Lovi, you don't need to be scared. Everybody is a newbie just like you."

"I am not scared."

"Hmmm."

"Don't look at me like that. Okay, fine. I won't quit."

"Did you stay behind just to state the obvious?"

Was he teasing him? He was, wasn't he? Lovino was not going to fall for that.

"...no?"

Antonio waited.

“Care for a drink?” Lovino asked, surprising himself with his bluntness and sudden change of subject. Blushing, Lovino rushed to add: “It would soothe my nerves.”

Antonio’s breathing was calm, as if he had expected the invitation and was not at all shocked by it. Lovino had no idea why he choose to pay attention to the rise and fall of Antonio’s chest of all things, but in that moment, the fact Antonio was there breathing next to him filled his heart with joy. The Spaniard bounced his shoulder to balance his backpack better on his back and the sudden movement pushed Lovino out of his reverie.

“Sure,” Antonio whispered. If Lovino didn’t know any better, he could swear Antonio was leaning down for a kiss. He moved away and abruptly turned his back to him. Lovino heard Antonio sigh but he didn’t dare to give in to temptation just yet.

Not knowing where else to go, they walked together towards the bar they went to the last time, but when they finally reached the front door, they suddenly had a change of heart and kept going. With no particular direction in mind, feeling the night breeze caress their cheeks and mess up their hair, Lovino and Antonio fell in step and unconsciously let their arms brush against each other.

It was not very late, but the black sky above them gave the impression they were keeping early hours. Lovino wanted to sit somewhere, but going to the park was out of the question, what with the junkies setting camp there and all, and continuing to Antonio’s apartment or to his didn’t look like the shrewdest of moves. Yet, walking and not talk about anything looked even more stupid. When Antonio sighed for the fifth time in five minutes, Lovino finally decided to break the silence.

“What did you see in me?” Antonio tilted his head to the side, confusion written all over his face, and Lovino clicked his tongue in annoyance. “You know what I mean.”

“Not really.” Antonio’s sheepish smile could be called cute if Lovino didn’t find it particularly irritating in that moment. Oh, who was he kidding... oblivious Antonio was the handsomest.

“Why did you start flirting with me?” Lovino asked, careful in his choice of words and regretting it when Antonio arched an eyebrow at him.

“You flirted with me first.”

“I don’t remember it that way.”

“To be honest, I don’t even remember how all of this started,” Antonio confessed and laughed in embarrassment. Lovino wanted nothing more than to punch him in the stomach but his fist betrayed him and his hand searched for Antonio’s fingers instead. There was a sharp intake of breath and Lovino’s heart flipped in his chest: he had managed to catch Antonio by surprise.

“Would you do it again?” Lovino asked.

“Probably not.”

“Oh.” Lovino pulled his hand away but Antonio caught it again before Lovino could leave his side.

“If I did it again, I would probably take you out to dinner first,” Antonio said, lacing his fingers through Lovino’s. “I tried to, anyway, the first time around, but it didn’t really work.” The corner of his lips tugged upward and Lovino was mesmerized by that lopsided, half-joking, half-bitter smile.

“Hmmm...”

“As much as I loved the nights we spent together, we did move kinda fast,” Antonio said and Lovino looked away, trying to hide the blush that appeared on his cheeks.

“...I...”

“I am just as guilty as you, so there’s no need to apologize. Come on, don’t give me that look. I mean it.”

“You should know I don’t like the friends-with-benefits trope, so that day--”

“And I told you already that I’m not the type either.”

Lovino remembered that and gulped down his sudden discomfiture.

“The thing is...” Lovino said, feeling the confession ready to get out of his mouth but still too afraid to speak the truth. Antonio squeezed his fingers gently and Lovino cast his eyes downwards, towards their interlocked hands. “The thing is,” he repeated, gaining courage. “I... I felt that if I didn’t ask then, I would have never asked and I would have pushed you away from the get-go. I am a coward, Antonio. Don’t judge me; I know I pushed you away in the end anyway but that’s because I am not worth anything. I am capable of nothing and I’m awkward when I truly like someone. Sex is easy; you don’t need to think and I feel I’m good at it. That is the only thing I am good at.”

“Lovi...”

“No, I don’t need your pity. My father was considered a great man, in every sense. He was a great leader, a great businessman, a great lover. I admired him so much, and yet he always had a soft spot for my brother. Feliciano is everything I am not, but in some aspects he’s naïve. He could become a great leader and a great businessman if he wants to, and I know that. So I decided to take the last slice of our heredity cake and became a great lover instead. It’s the only thing I could think of to make him proud--my dad, I mean. But that only made me hate him. You know what? Everything I fucking did, ended up with me hating the things I managed to get. I hated my job, I hated my family, I hated the way I lived before I met you... and then... then...” Suddenly feeling that he said too much, Lovino shut up and looked away again. “I’m sorry for the way I acted, but in that moment, I felt I couldn’t make it work in any other way.”

“Were you scared that I would hate you? Is that why you pushed me away?”

“Well, you do, don’t you?”

“No.” The answer hold such tenderness in it, Lovino welled up. He let out a shaky breath and he bit his lips. Great. He would look so pathetic if he started crying now. “But there’s more to it, isn’t there?”

“I was afraid... hmm.... I am afraid I will end up hating you too.”

“But you don’t love me to prove something to somebody... do you? Because, ‘til now, that was the problem, right?” Antonio’s tone of voice grew more doubtful by the second.

“Love?” Lovino looked up at Antonio and for a moment he saw fear flashing across Antonio’s eyes. The Spaniard abruptly stopped walking, inadvertently pulling Lovino towards him.

“I already told you my story.”

“I am not afraid of your past,” Lovino stated, although it was only half the truth.

“Well, I am.” Antonio sighed. “I left Isabela to be a better man. It wasn’t just because of the friends and enemies I made along the way. I wanted to change.”

Lovino opened his mouth to retort but thought better of it and waited for Antonio to continue.

“I *tried* to change,” Antonio confessed. “I was not the kind of guy you would have liked to date, Lovi.” He willed his lips into a smile that made Lovino’s stomach churn. “But some things can’t change. I am used to getting what I want on a silver platter, without asking, without thinking if it’s the right thing to do. I couldn’t stop you that day. But I should have.” Lovino kept silent and Antonio continued: “You took advantage of my weakness... but I took advantage of yours too.”

Lovino held his gaze and felt his head light.

“I think I love you, Lovi,” Antonio said, not letting his eyes off of Lovino’s face. “We started this out on the wrong foot, but...”

Lovino’s heart was going to burst in his chest. He bit his lip and lowered his gaze.

“I love you,” Antonio repeated with much more confidence. “You might think you are not worth anything, but you are much better than me. You are brave and talented and have a sharp tongue, which I always envied.” That comment made Lovino chuckle and snort back a sob at the same time. “There are so many reasons why I’m sure your father would be damn proud of you and—”

And Lovino couldn’t bear it anymore.

He burst into tears, falling right into Antonio’s arms. He pressed his face against his chest and hung onto him like an anchor. Antonio’s hands immediately found his lower back and his lips grazed Lovino’s temple.

The moon was barely visible in the black sky, covered by clouds of smog. The headlights of the cars racing by were blinding; their shadows stretched at their feet and blended into the night, as if there were no one else in that city but them. At least, that was what they felt like, despite being surrounded by people. Groups of lively friends and nervous singles walked up and down the sidewalk, getting out of cheap restaurants or waiting in line outside newly opened bars. Lovino and Antonio could have done the same but in that moment, there was nothing that they wanted to do more than strolling aimlessly around.

Nevertheless, Lovino felt they were heading somewhere and it was not without some mix of nervousness and anticipation that he finally found the courage to ask the question that had been bothering him for a while. He was calm, the tears had stopped falling, he could do it.

“After all this, do you still want to be with me?”

At that, Antonio smiled brightly as the sun.

“If you want to be with me too.”

“I’ll have to think about it.” Lovino looked skywards and purposely avoided Antonio’s gaze.

“Face it, you are terrified of commitment.”

“As if you aren’t.”

“Touché.”

Lovino laughed.

“Do you really have to?”

“Do what?”

“Think about it.”

“Hmmm.”

“Well?”

Lovino chuckled. “Oh, yes...”

“How long?”

“Hmmm.” Lovino thought it over and smiled. “You impatient man, I will decide after the competition.”

“What?”

“We could even bet on it. If Bella and I win, I will date you. If not, well, goodbye.”

“What?! Loviiii! Is this really your idea of ‘thinking about it’??”

Lovino laughed. “I wanna play hard to get.”

Antonio looked at him in disbelief. “...are you really going to decide about us like that?”

Us. Lovino loved that word.

“Yes,” he said.

“Lovi.”

“No, I am not changing my mind. If I win, I will date you.”

Antonio pouted and the warmth of his arm set on Lovino’s skin. It felt right and wrong at the same time, but for the love of God, he didn’t want it to go away.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Once again, a big thanks to my co-pilot, TheCrystallFalls. Her support and advice are the only things that are keeping this building of a fic from collapsing. Thank you. <3
And thank you to all of you, who took the time to read this, and another thank you to all of those who wanted to leave a comment as well! You are all amazing, and I love you.
<3

Chapter Fourteen

Twirling the ring around her finger, Bella let her gaze flicker nervously between the dance floor and the crowd gathering around it. A lump in her throat formed every time someone stepped into the hall towards the seats meant for the audience. She swallowed that annoying, nonexistent mass down, but it was hopeless. Her anxiety wouldn't go away.

Lovino knew very well what she was going through. The two shared a long, understanding look, before he focused his attention to a point in front of him. The less he looked around him, the better. He was going to pretend they weren't there. He didn't even dare to move. So he kept facing forwards, and he would have done an amazing job at it if it wasn't for his itchy back. His mouth twitched in irritation and he cautiously moved his hand upwards. He scratched the patch of skin right above his collarbone, before he let his fingers roam downwards to his torso. But then his collarbone itched again, and his shoulder, and his elbow.... damn it. He was itching *all over*.

"Can you stop doing that?!" Gilbert snapped, suddenly grabbing his hand when Lovino started violently scratching his knee.

"It's this damn costume!"

"Looking at you rubbing yourself like a flea-bitten chiwawa makes *me* itchy!"

"Then. Don't. Stare!" Lovino bit back. Gilbert's red eyes looked at him, unamused.

"I can't," he said, in the most dead tone of voice he could master. Lovino arched an eyebrow, so Gilbert rolled his eyes upwards and said, not before giving him an obvious look over: "It's so... flashy."

"Flashy," Lovino repeated coldly.

"And very revealing," Bella added next to him.

Revealing?? “For the love of God!” Lovino shouted, squirting out his hands to cover his crotch, forgetting that Gilbert’s fingers were still intertwined with his. Lovino almost fell from his chair when he realized what he was about to do. “*Oh fuck!*” He pushed the albino violently away, hoping that no one had witnessed the accidental almost-cupping. His squirming, however, had attracted at least a dozen of amused eyes, and, of course, Gilbert had no intention to let it go.

Grinning from ear to ear, Gilbert said: “Wow, Lovino. Just... wow. Aren’t you moving fast?”

There was only one solution to this.

“I’m outta here!” Lovino declared, standing up and almost falling onto Matthew’s lap, who was sitting behind him.

“It’s going to be alright,” Matthew said, pushing him back to his chair, gently but firmly. “Just sit down.”

Blushing madly, Lovino did as told and crossed his arms over his chest. He cast a quick glance at Matthew again, scowling at the way he was dressed. The Canadian was wearing simple, albeit tight, black pants and an elegant white button down shirt. If one had to judge his role in the competition based only on his clothes, everyone would have said he was one of the jury members. Next to him, fidgeting in her red dress, Katyusha timidly showed off her curvy silhouette. Her outfit was a little bit too small for her big breasts, which threatened to slip out of her bra at any moment. Nevertheless, it was just as elegant as Matthew’s -and just as tight. It seemed that Antonio hadn’t quite taken their measures well and had ordered costumes that were at least two sizes smaller than what they were supposed to.

Even Gilbert looked uncomfortable in his dark purple costume -which, contrary to Matthew and Katyusha’s, looked like a typical ice-skating outfit rather than a suit meant for tango. His biceps and chest were practically tearing the fabric at the seams. Only Bella and Elizabeta’s dresses fit them perfectly. Their floral dresses had something both sensual and naive in them, which brought out their beauty. While Eliza’s had no sleeves and was decorated with Cosmos flowers, Bella boasted big, yellow daisies that went well with Lovino’s sparkly suit. Antonio had thought well to have both pairs coordinated.

But there was a problem. Of all costumes, only Lovino’s had glitter on it.

Lovino shot a murderous look at Antonio’s way, who was sitting on the other side of the dance floor, talking amiably with who Lovino presumed to be other tango teachers. He even recognized the receptionist of their school among them.

“I think we are not sitting in the right place,” Elizabeta said, suddenly standing up, letting her gaze wander around the room. “We should sit down with the other dancers. You see? They are right over there. Come on!” Elizabeta snapped, irritated. Her lips slightly twitched into a frown and without another word walked away to where the competition’s participants were standing like terrified sheep. Lovino watched as Elizabeta pointed to the velvet covered chairs lined up in rows. One of the dancers nodded and, as soon as she sat down, they all did the same.

“What’s up with her?” Lovino asked, creasing his forehead when Katyusha and Bella shared a knowing glance. Gilbert shrugged. He made to follow his partner but a young lady with a fancy pink hat stopped him and handed him a round nameplate with a number on it.

“They are going first!” Katyusha whispered excitedly, pulling Lovino and Matthew by the sleeves. As if on cue, Gilbert turned around and showed them the N.1 on his nameplate. The young girl rolled her eyes upwards at him and proceeded to hand the nameplates she was holding in a bag to the rest of the participants. In a matter of seconds, their performing order was clear. Matthew and Katyusha were the 7th pair of the show, whereas Lovino and Bella were going to compete for last.

“There are fifteen pairs in total,” Lovino whined as they took their seats along with the rest of their group. “This is never going to end.”

Around them the crowd was slowly growing impatient; they all wanted the competition to start and, according to some, they were already late as it was. As if bending to the audience’s silent wishes, the lights suddenly dimmed out. The host of the competition, a man in his thirties wearing a fancy black suit, stepped in the middle of the ballroom, mic in hand. With the corner of his eye, Lovino noticed Antonio waving at their group to get their attention. As soon as he got it, he gave them a thumbs up and Lovino found himself lifting his hand to wave back at him, despite being still sour at Antonio’s choice of costume.

“Oh, finally!” Gilbert exclaimed when the host started presenting each pair with his deep, husky voice, which was able to cover Gilbert’s shreeky exclamation. Lovino would have loved to have that kind of ability. Seriously, the only one who could talk over Gilbert was Ludwig when he was angry, and that didn’t happen often.

“Hmm, finally…” Bella agreed, moving her chair closer to Lovino’s and pushing the Italian out of his thoughts about Gilbert and his annoying voice. “I just want this to be over already.”

Lovino snapped his head to face her, blinking in shock when his friend flashed him a small, sheepish smile. That was all he needed to know he hadn’t misheard her.

“I thought you were excited about this?”

“I…” Bella chuckled. “I was? I am.” She laughed again and scratched the back of her head, careful not to mess up her hairstyle.

“You were.”

The host suddenly called out their names, and Lovino and Bella stood briefly up to bow slightly to the audience. At least, Bella did; Lovino just somewhat bent his knees and plopped down in his chair again immediately after. The host thanked them all for participating and moved on towards the jury panel to introduce its members to the audience.

Finally out of the spotlight, Lovino returned to the subject at hand: “Why this sudden change of heart?”

Bella sighed. “Okay, *maybe* I am still a tiny bit invested in this.”

“...I see. You are just nervous.”

Bella counterattacked his teasing smirk with a frown. “You can make fun of me all you like, Lovino, but I am suddenly reconsidering all of my choices here. We prepared so hard for this! And yet! Argh, I am not ready for this.”

“It’s not the end of the world if we don’t do our best, Bella,” Lovino said, flashing her an encouraging smile. “Do you want to win this so badly?”

“Hmm...” Bella thought about Lovino’s question for a moment. “I guess not. I mean, I know very well why I decided to join in, but I finally realized that the outcome of this competition isn’t going to be as life-changing as I first hoped it would be. What about you?”

At her unexpected question, Lovino’s desire to find Antonio’s eyes had grown suddenly bigger. He let his gaze wander over the audience to have something else to focus on. The opening of one of the side doors on his left caught his eye, and he arched an eyebrow in surprise when he saw Roderich making his way to the only empty seat in the row further up.

“No,” Lovino said, hoping that Bella wouldn’t detect the lie in his words. “Winning is not going to change my life in any way.”

“Right.” Bella smiled widely. “So being nervous is stupid, isn’t it?”

The audience suddenly started clapping: the competition had officially started.

Lovino glanced at Bella. “Who am I kidding, I am nervous as shit.”

Bella let out a bark of laughter. “So let’s be nervous together?” She asked and grabbed Lovino’s hand. He gave her fingers an encouraging squeeze and reverted her attention to the middle of the dance floor, where Gilbert and Elizabeta were staring awkwardly at each other like teenagers at a prom.

Elizabeta squeezed her eyes to look at the audience again and let out a surprised squeak that made the crowd giggle. At that, she finally pulled out of her stupor and put her hands on Gilbert’s shoulders as the choreography demanded her to. Curious about what brought that reaction out of her, Lovino turned around and noticed Roderich pushing his glasses further up his nose.

“They look incredible...” Bella whispered. Reverting his attention back to the pair, Lovino couldn’t help but nod in agreement. They were both a sight to behold.

Gilbert had suddenly regained his usual confidence, smirking at Elizabeta in that annoying way of his. She didn’t seem to mind, and with unexpected professionalism, she waited for him to make the first step. The music filled the room and off they went...

The first thing Lovino noticed about them was that Gilbert looked like a walking stick with legs. He had no sense of rhythm, or if he did, he was moving so fast Elizabeta could barely keep up. At first, there was fluidity in her movements, but her competing instinct prevailed and she started moving just as badly as Gilbert, as if trying to prove a point to him. The result

was a complete disaster, even when they both were following their steps perfectly, having repeated them ad nauseam. Gilbert was good at remembering the whole choreography; Elizabeta tended to improvise, but did a good job at it. She stepped on Gilbert's foot once; he didn't even wince. He smiled; she smiled. And Lovino finally realized they had stopped caring about their dance long ago. What it mattered to them now, if one had to judge by their careless movements, was showing each other what they were able to do.

"They are having fun," Katyusha whispered behind them.

"The judges are not even paying attention," Matthew commented. Lovino raised his eyes towards the jury panel and arched an eyebrow when he spotted one of them texting away on her smartphone. It didn't last long. She immediately put the phone away and stared back at the dance floor.

Matthew was wrong. The jury was clearly paying attention to their every step. The displeased frown of an old man to the woman's right was a clear sign he was not entirely content with the way the competition had started. Elizabeta and Gilbert were doing their best, but when they finished their routine almost a minute sooner than it was supposed to, the audience looked at each other, unsure whether to applaud or not. They stood awkwardly in the middle of the dance floor, waiting for the music to end. Then Gilbert took Elizabeta's hand and bowed once, grinning widely at them. A mild round of applause filled the uncomfortable silence. Elizabeta waved. With the corner of his eye, Lovino saw Roderich wave back.

It was time for the next pair to step on the dance floor, and it was obvious from the get go that theirs was going to be much better than Gilbert and Elizabeta's uncoordinated stunt.

"Oh, we are sure gonna win this one, right Lizzie? We were awesome, weren't we?" Gilbert asked, taking his place next to Lovino again. "I think no one will be better than us! We are *totally* going to win this!"

"Stop boasting," Lovino warned him.

"But she stepped on your fo--!" Katyusha bit her lip at Gilbert's piercing stare. "Okay, nevermind."

"I won't step on your foot," Bella promised Lovino, making him snort. They looked at each other and smiled.

"I hope Ludwig recorded that," Gilbert said just then, turning around in his seat towards the audience. "Do you know where he's sitting, by the way?"

"He's right over there." Elizabeta pointed at the second row on their left. Lovino and Gilbert turned around at the same time, but whereas Gilbert's curiosity turned into amusement, Lovino's face became one of pure horror. A small sound of betrayal escaped his throat, and Lovino clutched Gilbert's shoulder, hard.

"My eyes!"

Gilbert chuckled. "Close them."

Arching an eyebrow in confusion, Elizabeta glanced towards Ludwig herself. “They... are just... kissing?”

“Just kissing??”

Lovino couldn't keep his eyes off his CEO. To be honest, he wasn't really looking at him, but at his brother sitting *right next* to him. Feliciano had shot his arms around Ludwig's shoulders, nuzzling his nose on the other's cheek and pressing his lips on the corner of Ludwig's mouth. Lovino was glad that Ludwig seemed absolutely embarrassed about it. Even from that distance, Lovino could discern the slight blush on Ludwig's face.

“He didn't bring the video camera!” Gilbert exclaimed, clicking his tongue in annoyance. As if he had heard him, Feliciano suddenly turned towards them and waved enthusiastically.

“Awww. Aren't they cute?” Elizabeta asked with a soft smile on her lips. She lifted her hand to return Feliciano's gesture, and Feliciano started flailing his arms about, earning a disapproving look both from Ludwig and the people sitting around him.

“They are in a public place,” Lovino hissed. “He's... he's the CEO of a great company, damn it. He should at least show some dignity!”

“Dignity?” Gilbert arched an eyebrow. “*That* doesn't even count as PDA. You don't know what real kissing looks like, Lovino? Want me to show you?” He asked, grinning.

“Shut the fuck up, asshole! This is serious. Feliciano is a kid!” At Gilbert smirk, Lovino coughed in his hand, embarrassed. “You know what I mean,” he mumbled, but Gilbert's knowing smirk just grew wider.

“Oh, let them be,” Elizabeta said, turning her attention back to the couple dancing in front of them. “Are we in the Middle Ages? What's a little bit of cuddling in a public space nowadays? Plus, they are going to get married. At this point, I would bet my head they've done worse already.”

“Don't you dare imply--!” Lovino made to retort, but then understanding hit him like a ton of bricks and he stared at Elizabeta in horror. “Wait, wait, wait. They are going to do what??”

Elizabeta's snapped her eyes to Gilbert. Lovino blinked at them both.

“Don't worry,” Gilbert said with a sigh and leaned towards Elizabeta to whisper in her ear, loud enough for Lovino to hear. “He's pretending it's not happening.”

“This is not happening.” Lovino groaned in his hands.

“Will you stop talking so loudly?” a woman snapped just then, giving them all a disapproving look over. “We are trying to watch the show.”

“Sorry, madam!” Gilbert exclaimed with a wide grin. After that, none of them dared to speak anymore.

By the time they got to Katyusha and Matthew's turn, sleep had threatened to engulf Lovino at least thrice. Tango was a sensual dance to marvel at, but after four, five, *six* choreographies with the same steps, listening to the same tune over and over again, Lovino was going to die from boredom. It didn't help that they all were newbies and their performances were anything but exciting and original. Only the next in turn seemed wide awake, knowing very well that in a few minutes they would either please the jury or make a fool of themselves. It was the only explanation Lovino could give for Katyusha's wide open stare and the tremble on her lips.

When the host called out the next pair, both Matthew and Katyusha seemed a step away from fainting. They shot up at the same time, took a step forward and two backwards, almost falling in the laps of the people sitting in the row behind theirs. Gilbert patted Matthew on the back, giving him words of encouragement, while Bella and Elizabeta showed Katyusha the thumbs up. The two smiled nervously at their friends—an almost identical twitch of the lips upwards—and timidly made their way to the middle of the dancefloor. Matthew tentatively put his hands around Katyusha's waist, and the girl let out a sigh of resignation before she encircled his shoulders with her arms.

The music started playing without delay and off they went. All awkwardness and shyness the two were reeking of disappeared in a poof of smoke. In a matter of seconds, the pair became two completely different people. Lovino couldn't believe his eyes, and for a moment, he blamed the blinding spotlights for it. He had watched them repeating the same steps over and over again for months. He remembered how clumsy Katyusha had been in the beginning, how embarrassed Matthew felt for being the center of attention every time it was time for them to practice in front of the rest of the group. Was it possible that he had been so engrossed in his own issues that he hadn't realized how much his friends had grown?

Lovino was suddenly ashamed of himself. He shot a quick look over to Feliciano and Ludwig, who were watching the performance with almost identical, concentrated expressions on their faces. Nevertheless, Ludwig's stoic look lacked the naive marvel that shone through Feliciano's eyes. Lovino could recognize his brother's expression everywhere, even when they were separated by rows and rows of audience. How many times has he seen it on him already? Too many to count. Feliciano wondered at the world like a child; the only thing that not even pain and suffering could take away from him.

Nevertheless, Lovino felt that something was off.

Feliciano and Ludwig were holding hands, and yet there was nothing childish about it. It was like they had dealt with their issues like adults did and Lovino had missed the whole ordeal. Feliciano had grown through the experience and it showed.

Damn. Lovino had been blind to many things.

Eyes travelling back to Katyusha's red dress, Lovino decided to just enjoy the show. Matthew led Katyusha around the ballroom with unexpected self-assurance; she followed him, but not blindly. There was a teasing spring in her steps that gave the whole choreography a lighter tone. Their *hamaca* was perfect, flawless and pleasing to the eye. Matthew's *molinete* had nothing to envy to Antonio's.

“They are the best so far,” Bella whispered next to him. “Do you think they had been practicing outside of class too?”

Lovino wouldn't be surprised if they had. “The jury likes them,” he said, glancing briefly at the woman taking notes at the jury table. Even the man sitting besides her was smiling in appreciation.

“It's supposed to be a newbie competition, but they are treating us like professionals.”

“Maybe it's all make-believe to make us give our best,” Lovino said, to calm both Bella and himself down. Just in that moment, Katyusha slipped, stepping on Matthew's toe ever so lightly before continuing with their choreography as if nothing was the matter. All members of the jury put their heads down and started writing frantically in their notebooks.

Bella and Lovino shared a preoccupied look.

After Matthew and Bella's performance, there was a small break. Lovino immediately grabbed the opportunity by the wings and bolted out of the stuffy room, along with half the audience. He quickly made his way to the bathroom, anticipating the moment he would throw some icy cold water on his face, and wondering if he could take his itchy costume off for a moment in one of the stalls. Yet, the line in front of the bathroom was so long, Lovino decided to change plans at the last minute and get out of the building instead.

The sun above him was scorching hot, but, despite the difference in temperature between the ballroom and outside, he welcomed the breeze of fresh air on his face with open arms. In that dark room, he had completely forgotten it wasn't even past noon. They have started early in the morning -whoever came up with that plan was a bastard- and the competition was supposed to last a little more than two hours. But at the rate they were going, they would still be there by dinnertime.

Lovino leaned against the wall and let out a sigh, suddenly noticing the small bump he called a stomach. His costume was indeed too revealing...

“What are you doing out here?”

Lovino turned his head towards the source of the voice, arching an eyebrow when Antonio leaned against the wall an inch away from him.

“Are you stalking me?” he asked, swearing inwardly when his tone of voice came as flirtier than he intended.

“Might be.” Antonio laughed, but then he turned serious again. “You've been avoiding me.”

“I am not,” Lovino rushed to say. Oh, who was he kidding. He had been trying hard not to cross gazes with Antonio since he arrived in that goddamned place.

“Are you angry at me?”

“Why would I...” Lovino frowned, but after glancing down at his stomach again, he said: “Yes, I am. This fucking costume is too... tight.”

The look over Antonio gave him didn’t make him feel any better about it. “It suits you.” Lovino rolled his eyes upwards. “But this is not the reason you’ve been... avoiding me, isn’t it?”

“I am not,” Lovino said again. “I’m just...” *Get the truth out, Lovino, now.* “I know the way you’re looking at me, Antonio. I can picture it in my head and it makes me nervous.”

Antonio didn’t seem to understand what Lovino implied, and made it worse by saying: “Remember you have to win.”

“Yeah... that’s exactly the kind of pressure I am talking about... I want to concentrate on my choreography. If I see you looking at me like that, I might--”

Lovino felt Antonio’s hand brush against his own, softly, lovingly. “I’m sorry... I just want you to win so much.”

Should Lovino lie? Pretend to be an asshole and say the exact opposite of what he thought, as he had been doing for the past oh-so years?

Tempting, but no.

“You have no idea how much I want the same.”

He finally looked at Antonio - *looked at him* - and he was surprised by the shock that flashed in the other’s eyes. Lovino clicked his tongue in irritation, but then he realized he had no reason to get angry. Antonio wasn’t used to him being entirely truthful. It was time to change that.

“I just wonder... is the trophy gonna be worth it?” he asked. He let his lips form a teasing smile, holding Antonio’s gaze as he stared intently at him.

“Yes.”

Lovino’s eyebrows arched upwards. “Oh, is that so.”

“Lovino.”

“See you back in the ballroom, moron,” Lovino said instead, ignoring the heated look Antonio was throwing at him. He walked back inside, perfectly aware that Antonio was following him with his eyes. He could feel it pierce his back. Flattering, really.

When they finally got around to Bella and Lovino’s turn, Lovino was ready to tear his hair out in frustration. He had expected to hate this competition, but not *that much*. He remembered when Antonio brought him to a show that had focused entirely on tango--their first date, now that he thought about it. He recalled how Antonio had whispered the names of

the different steps in his ear, how his hair stood on end, how he had been fascinated by it and by Antonio's passion for it. This competition, maybe because it was meant for newbies, lacked all of that and more. It was bland and unexciting, with the exception of a few dancers.

Lovino bet that even the audience was happy when Bella and he made their way towards the stage. They were the last pair and then everyone could go home or out to eat. Lovino's stomach grumbled and Bella heard it. She flashed him an amused smile, and Lovino looked down at his feet in embarrassment. And yet, he wanted to laugh. Was it the accumulated tension? Was it his previous conversation with Antonio?

Suddenly, nothing made sense. Nothing was important anymore. He looked up again to face Bella and grinned at her. Taking her hand in his, he led her to the middle of the ballroom and took position.

"You look stunning," Lovino said, pressing his body to hers.

"Stop flirting," Bella teasefully reproached him. "And thank you, I know."

His bark of laughter was covered by the slow, sensual music. Antonio had made sure their every step would do their curves justice and the audience oogle. Lovino realized his plan only now, blinded by the spotlight, feeling Bella's outer thigh under his palm. The bastard. Their choreography compelled them both to strut, to show off, to look as if they were ready to find a room and lock themselves in for a couple of hours. Technically, Katyusha and Matthew had been the best, but aesthetically....

Now Lovino understood Antonio's choice of costume. Now he saw why Bella's dress was so wide and comfortable.

Well, if you're like that, playing favorites... Lovino thought, going for a side step dip. I'll give you a show you won't forget.

Bella tilted her head, her hair brushed against his shoulder and he tacked them behind her ear with his index. That gesture was completely unplanned but he realized that it was one of his best moves. The audience's eyes were glued on them. The jury was scribbling away in their notebooks and Antonio...

Lovino locked eyes with him, feeling giddy when he saw him staring at them with his lips slightly parted. Bella followed his gaze and, when they were doing a *media luna*, she found the opportunity to whisper in his ear without the jury noticing.

"You got him wrapped around your finger."

"And you got the whole audience around yours," Lovino whispered back, willing himself to tear his eyes away from Antonio. Bella giggled. Her hands travelled down his back.

"This is fun."

Lovino smiled softly at her.

"I'm glad to have been your partner."

Her face brightened up. “Me too.”

The music was still playing when they were finished. They must have missed a couple of steps somewhere, a mistake the jury wasn’t going to take lightly, but they didn’t care. They stood in the middle of the dance floor staring at each other, holding each other's hand. Gilbert shot up and started applauding, followed immediately by Elizabeta. After a moment of hesitation, the crowd did the same. It was not as heartfelt as for other pairs, but neither Bella nor Lovino cared.

They smiled and bowed, and with that the competition was finally over.

“How much time do they need to come to a decision??” Lovino hissed, crossing his arms over his chest and bobbing his legs up and down. Bella and Elizabeta shot him an annoyed look and immediately glued their attention on the jury talking quietly among themselves, comparing notes and tapping their pens on the table to get their points across.

Meanwhile, the host was thanking everyone for being there and cracked a joke about being late for lunch with his wife. Someone laughed, others had already left, apparently not interested in the jury verdict. Feliciano had left Ludwig’s side to come sit with Lovino and was staring at the jury panel with eyes wide open in trepidation.

“Oh! I think they are done!” Feliciano exclaimed, pointing at the man nodding his head to the host, who immediately ran to his side. They leaned towards each other and started talking, while one of the members of the jury handed a letter to the host.

Matthew was biting his nails. “That’s the list.”

“They are putting away their notes,” Gilbert added.

“I have eyes, idiot.”

“The host is walking back on the stage--”

Elizabeta huffed. “Gilbert! Shut the fuck up.”

“He takes the mike in--!”

“Damn it, Gilbert!! This is not funny!”

“I like when you scream my name, Lovino.”

“Sssssh!”

The audience grew suddenly silent when the host cleared his throat to get their attention. Not even the chairs creaked as people leaned in their seats, excited. Lovino and Antonio shared a look. After thanking them once more for coming, the host raised the list and said:

“.... *and third place goes to...!*”

Drum rolls came out of nowhere. The dancers flickered their gazes from one to the other. Lovino was the only one who didn't give a damn. He was having fun seeing Antonio shifting in his seat in nervousness.

"... to the lovely Susan and Mark, from...!"

A mild round of applause. Biting a nail, Antonio tried to get Lovino's attention.

"And now, second place goes to....!"

Lovino furrowed his eyebrows. Antonio crossed his fingers.

"He's such an idiot..." Lovino mumbled.

"Who is?" Feliciano asked.

"Katyusha and Matthew, from...!"

"We won?! We won?!" Katyusha's surprised voice made some people in the audience laugh. Matthew and she shared a shocked glance and shot up on their feet.

"Congrats!" Elizabeta exclaimed, standing up as well and pulling both of them into a crushing hug. Knowing Lizzie's strength, Lovino didn't think it was a pleasant experience.

"And now, the winners of the competition are...!"

Antonio's eyes were suddenly on him and Lovino lifted his fingers in mock salute. Call him a sadist, but he was having fun.

"... Carmen and Terrence, from...! Congratulations! You have been..."

Antonio's face dropped. Lovino bit his lip to try not to burst out laughing.

Just by looking at him, Lovino's heart was drowned in warmth and every drop streamed down to his intestines, filling his whole soul with love. If auras existed, Lovino would bet his own was radiating like melted gold. What the hell. Love was making him weak. Who in their right mind would utter such things? He could feel the way his eyes softened, how his hands yearned to touch Antonio, pull him into a hug and never let him go. Antonio's expression was one of doubt and fear: Lovino could hear his thoughts. *Don't. Don't. Don't.*

What an idiot. Lips twitching upwards, Lovino put a hand over his face to hide his smile. He forced himself to remain serious, look sad, even, no matter how difficult it was in that moment not to do anything impulsive.

When the round of applause died out, everyone stood up to talk to each other and congratulate the winners. In the general chaos that followed, Lovino found his chance to get away from his group to get closer to where Antonio was standing. His tango teacher was waiting for him, nervously clenching and unclenching his fists.

“So,” Lovino said, coming to a halt an inch away from him. Antonio tilted his head to the side.

“So?”

“I guess it’s settled, isn’t it? I didn’t win.”

Antonio hissed, as if Lovino’s words had stabbed him. He made an imperceptible step backwards while anger flashed across his face. It was a blink and you’ll miss it moment, but it was enough for Lovino to get a taste of what Antonio used to be. Surprisingly, he wasn’t scared.

Slouching his shoulders, Antonio forced himself to smile. “You did your best and you both looked amazing.”

“You should probably go congratulate Matthew and Katyusha. They deserve it.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. I guess so.” Antonio, however, didn’t seem willing to leave his side just yet.

Oh, how much Lovino loved him. He loved every inch of his soul, the new and the past one, the anger crawling under Antonio’s skin and the love brightening up his face. He loved all of his contradictions; all his weak and strong points. He loved him, and Lovino was dying to tell him. The words were hanging at the tip of his tongue and yet he couldn’t confess just yet.

“There is something I need to tell you,” Lovino said. Antonio tensed.

“What is it?”

Was that hope in his voice? Lovino adored how oblivious Antonio was sometimes. Not that he would ever admit it out loud.

“From now on,” Lovino declared, “I want you to stop considering me as your student.”

“*WHAT?*” Gilbert’s cry caught them both unawares.

Lovino glanced behind his back only to see that Gilbert, Elizabeta, Feliciano, Ludwig, Bella, and even Katyusha and Matthew had followed him. Rolling his eyes to the ceiling, Lovino turned back to Antonio.

“You can’t quit!” Gilbert whined. Lovino clicked his tongue.

“That has nothing to do with you!”

“He’s right! You can’t quit! Forget about the bet!” Antonio exclaimed, grabbing him by the shoulders and leaning down to his eye level. “This is serious!”

“What bet?” Gilbert asked.

Antonio ignored him. “The fact you lost means nothing! You still have so much to learn and you are such a good-!”

Lovino slammed a hand over Antonio's mouth and took a deep breath. That guy was going to be the end of him one day.

"What the fuck. Do you even listen to yourself when you talk?? You were the one who told me--!"

"You can't quit!" Antonio mumbled behind Lovino's palm.

"Jesus! I don't want to be your damn student. Period."

"But... why?" Antonio's hurt tone of voice almost made Lovino reconsider his choice in love interest.

"You said you can't date your students!" Lovino exclaimed, pointing an accusing finger at Antonio's chest. "How can I date you without getting you in trouble if I'm still considered your student?? Which, granted, it's a stupid rule since we are both consensual adults or at least, I am an adult, who apparently wants to date a kid in disguise--!"

"You wanna date me?"

To say Antonio was taken aback would be a huge understatement and Lovino was seriously reconsidering his choices.

"You're such a moron! Of course I want to date you! Who cares about a fucking bet, which it wasn't even a bet, for the love of God. I just said it to tease you. Seriously! I have no idea why I fell in love with you and-! Oh, for fuck's sake!" He shouted, noticing Antonio had opened his mouth to retort. Lovino grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and crashed their lips together before Antonio could ruin their moment with yet another stupid question.

And... and... Lovino couldn't think straight at this point.

"Don't you have any decency?" Lovino ignored Gilbert's question. Antonio deepened the kiss and pulled him even closer. He wasn't in the mood to break the contact even when he heard Gilbert cry out in surprise.

"Did you see that, Lizzie??" Gilbert exclaimed behind them, over the sound of Elizabeta's laughter. "*He* gave me the middle finger--"

But with Antonio kissing him like there was no tomorrow, Lovino wasn't in the mood to listen to Elizabeta's or anyone's answer either. He concentrated on Antonio and him only.

There was no one else in the room but them.

Who would have thought it would come to this?

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